

**THE IMPACT OF SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALISM ON  
THE WORKS OF EVELYN DE MORGAN, 1870-1919**

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Impact of Science and Spiritualism in the Works of Evelyn De Morgan, 1870-1919.**

This thesis examines the extent to which spiritualism and science inform the paintings of Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919). I propose that her works in the period 1870-1919 incorporate Darwinist themes of evolutionary development integrated with a spiritualist paradigm of the progression of the soul after death. Chapter one examines the context and influences on De Morgan's mature works, including her family and friends. It considers the impact of her role as a professional woman artist in Pre-Raphaelite circles, and also her engagement with spiritualist practices as a medium. Chapter two argues that De Morgan's works are underpinned by a Darwinian model of evolution, expressed in her works as the progression of the soul, through the vehicle of the female physical body to the metaphysical realm. Chapter three considers how De Morgan reconfigures traditional Christian iconography and narratives through Platonist philosophy in order to create an alternative, feminist vision of divinity. Chapter four continues the exploration of science and spiritualism in relation to female empowerment through De Morgan's representation of witches and occult figures. It proposes that De Morgan's involvement in female suffrage and experience as a medium generate specific spiritualist meanings in her portrayal of occult figures. Chapter five asserts that De Morgan's recurrent concern with water and related imagery correlates with her spiritualist beliefs. It seeks to demonstrate that paintings with water imagery, including sea-scapes, shells and mermaids, conflate contemporary scientific and spiritualist concerns, which integrate the idea of evolutionary and spiritual development. The conclusion draws together the principal findings of the thesis, and argues that the empirical evidence and close analysis of De Morgan's works in the period 1870-1919 show that they are primarily motivated by De Morgan's engagement with spiritualism.

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*All paintings oil on canvas, except where stated.*

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### **List of Abbreviations (in alphabetical order)**

**COD:** Concise Oxford Dictionary, eighth edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

**DMFA:** De Morgan Foundation Archives, Witt Library, Courtauld Institute, London.

**LSA:** London Spiritualist Alliance.

**n.d.:** no date.

**V&A NAL:** Victoria and Albert Museum National Art Library, South Kensington, London.

**WSPU:** The Women's Social and Political Union.

## Introduction

### The impact of Science and Spiritualism in the Works of Evelyn De Morgan

“At the beginning of each year I say ‘I will do something’ and at the end I have done nothing. Art is eternal, but life is short.”<sup>1</sup> This statement, taken from De Morgan’s diary on her seventeenth birthday in 1872, illustrates the themes which were to dominate her adult life and career as a professional artist: the desire to produce art which transmits deeply spiritual messages, and the obstacles which she faced as a woman artist in achieving this.

Evelyn De Morgan was a successful and prolific professional artist in her own time, producing works for public exhibition from 1877 until her death in 1919. Her works have recently been the subject of several exhibitions and scholarly research,<sup>2</sup> including a major retrospective of both paintings and drawings in 1996. De Morgan’s work is distinctive in its rich use of colour, allegory and the dominance of the female figure, and has been considered Pre-Raphaelite as well as Symbolist.<sup>3</sup> Her work as a female Victorian artist is primarily associated with the second generation Pre-Raphaelites, including artists such as Edward Burne-Jones, Marie Spartali and Walter Crane, yet it

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<sup>1</sup>E. De Morgan, *Diary* 30 August 1872, De Morgan Foundation Archive (hereafter abbreviated to DMFA).

<sup>2</sup> There is a growing body of academic research into the life and works of Evelyn De Morgan, and other women in the De Morgan family, particularly Evelyn’s mother-in-law Sophia De Morgan. Along with some new published works on De Morgan, her paintings have recently been included in a variety of Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist exhibitions, and have also appeared in a retrospective exhibition of her main works, at the Russell Cotes Gallery in 1996.

<sup>3</sup> De Morgan’s *The Worship of Mammon* (c.1909) was included in the Tate Gallery exhibition *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts. Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*, London: Tate Gallery, 1997. See pp. 230-231. C. Wood also describes her as “one of the very few Pre-Raphaelite artists whose work can be described as Symbolist”. C. Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981, p.136.

would be a mistake to assume that her work is merely imitative of an existing repertoire of images or styles. Indeed, I will show that De Morgan's work draws upon controversial concepts of nineteenth-century science and theology, integrating Darwinian influences and the language of scientific empiricism with eclectic religious symbolism and literary sources. These ideas are all developed through De Morgan's active involvement in the spiritualist movement. I will argue that De Morgan's support of women's rights and the suffragette movement is represented in her choice of subject-matter, dominated by the female form and strong female characters from myth and legend. De Morgan's allegiance to philanthropic organisations and activities reveals her political commitment to real change in the status of women, and to social reform in general.

The principal aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the full extent to which her very personal spiritualist beliefs and practices, inform the themes and iconography of her work, and how these beliefs are strongly underpinned by the integration of scientific investigation: in particular, the Darwinian model of evolution, established through the publication of *The Origin of Species*, 1859. In addition, I will show that De Morgan's works may also be seen in terms of a feminist agenda, which has a strong affinity with the new roles and prominence spiritualism offered women in the late nineteenth century. De Morgan's works operate within the dialectic between the impetus of scientific evolution, and traditional theology. Spiritualism, in De Morgan's works, offers a resolution to the tensions between orthodox religion and scientific empiricism.

De Morgan's paintings are characterised by the use of complex allegories, and the prominence of the female form. The paintings display a specific interest in the confinement and limitations of the corporeal female body. Often in her works the limitations of this material body are resolved through an

engagement with death; thus death functions as an agency for female emancipation, particularly in acts of martyrdom. This theme of faith in the face of adversity, and the survival of the spirit, is explored by De Morgan in her representations of the development and transmigration of the soul after death. Through representations of the progression of the soul after death, and the struggle to gain spiritual enlightenment in life in paintings such as *The Captives* (n.d.) [Ill. 1] and *The Passing of the Soul at Death* (n.d.), De Morgan provides a profound response to the crisis of Christianity engendered by scientific rationalism, by producing and expanding on the metaphor of the evolving human spirit, or soul, whilst concurrently emphasising such expressions with a feminist rationale.<sup>4</sup>

In order to address the impact of science and spiritualism in De Morgan's works in the period 1870 - 1919, I will examine the correspondence between De Morgan's spiritualist activities, where she practices as a medium experimenting with automatic writing in a trance state<sup>5</sup>, and her interest in challenging the bourgeois codes of feminine behaviour. These developments are driven by De Morgan's personal and spiritualist concept of the evolving soul, which directly relates to Darwin's evolution of species.

I will examine De Morgan's work synchronically, implementing close

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<sup>4</sup> From the mid-nineteenth century, women artists had been politically active, particularly in women's rights campaigning. Barbara Bodichon (1827-1891) was a leader of such political agitation and founder of women's artistic and suffrage groups, and, although a generation older than Evelyn De Morgan, was a close friend of the De Morgans. See P. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon: Artist and Rebel*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1998. Other women artists, such as De Morgan's friend and contemporary, Emily Ford became active in socialist and feminist circles in the late nineteenth century. Ford, like De Morgan, became involved in spiritualism and painted a series of allegories intended to depict the soul's aspiration towards moral perfection. See D. Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, 1850-1900*, London: Routledge, October 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn and William De Morgan practised automatic writing for a number of years, from the mid-1880s until 1909, when they published the resulting transcripts, purporting to be correspondences with angels and other spirits, in *The Result of an Experiment*, London:



reading and analysis of how individual or small groups of paintings draw upon topical issues in late nineteenth-century British culture. I will also assess De Morgan's career in its developing historical and artistic context, examining relationships between broad cultural perspectives of Darwinism and Christianity and the impact these had on De Morgan's work. Through close analysis of De Morgan's work and the cultural milieu in which it existed, I will maintain that her art is a specific and innovative response to the challenge presented to religion by scientific discoveries.

As well as the spiritualist concerns which dominate her work, De Morgan's interests and circle of friends indicate her engagement with a variety of nineteenth-century issues, including socialism, pacifism and anti-materialism. De Morgan's marriage to William Frend De Morgan in 1887 consolidated an artistic and social circle which included most of the first and second-generation Pre-Raphaelite artists. These included the Burne-Jones's; the Morris family, William, Janey and, as a close friend to Evelyn, May Morris, with whom William and Evelyn shared a socialist viewpoint; Sir Edward Poynter, Principal of the Slade School and later the Royal Academy; the artist Simeon Solomon; Emily Ford, Charlotte Babb, an artist and women's rights activist; as well as Leighton, Holman Hunt, Singer-Sargent, Rossetti and Watts.

De Morgan's feminist beliefs involved the support of public campaigns. She was a signatory on the *Declaration in Favour of Women's Suffrage*, 1889, along with 100 other women artists, including those of De Morgan's circle, Charlotte Babb, Sophia Beale, Lucy Madox Brown, Emma Cooper, Susan Isabel Dacre, Margaret Dicksee, Maud Earl, Emily Ford, Lillie Stacpoole Haycraft, Louise Jopling, Jesse Toler Kingsley, Jessie McGregor, Emily Mary Osborn, Constance Phillott, Louisa Starr, Annie Swynnerton, Eliza Tuck, Mary

Waller and Henrietta Ward.<sup>6</sup> Many of these women, like De Morgan, chose to exhibit their works in the new galleries opening in London, such as the Grosvenor, Dudley and New Gallery, where their sometimes challenging and subversive subject-matter would have more opportunities to be chosen for display. These galleries were in direct competition with the Royal Academy, which represented the patriarchal establishment, and denied women membership. By boycotting exhibitions and art schools in this way, female artists were protesting about the conditions for women artists, as well as drawing attention to their works.

De Morgan's interest in social issues also extended to philanthropic enterprises such as the education and enlightenment of the working classes. She donated *The Christian Martyr* (c.1882) [Ill. 3] to the 1895 exhibition of the South London Art Gallery, and also loaned works of art for exhibitions aimed at what were considered the deprived working classes, living in slum conditions. The South London Art Gallery attracted other active feminist and socialist campaigners known to De Morgan, including Anna Swanwick, Susanna Winkworth, Louise Jopling and Clara Montalba.<sup>7</sup> The bourgeois ideals of humanitarianism in projects such as those organised by the South London Art Gallery, and allied causes such as suffrage, prison reform and educational rights, are topical issues in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

I will demonstrate that the spiritualism which informs De Morgan's work

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<sup>6</sup> D. Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists*, London: Routledge, 1993, p.93.

<sup>7</sup> The philanthropic movement for the education and improvement of the working classes was particularly powerful in the late nineteenth century, in the 1880s and 1890s. The South London Art Gallery was founded by William Rossiter, in 1878, and supported by Leighton, the Burne-Jones's (particularly Georgiana), Walter Crane, Val Prinsep and T.M. Rooke. As Waterfield points out "women played an important role in the activities of the new Gallery, in a way that was still not possible at such conservative institutions as the Royal Academy", in *Art for the People: Culture in the Slums of Late Victorian Britain*, G. Waterfield (ed.), London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1994, pp.31-63.

generates and resides in specific representations of feminism, particularly in the transfiguration of Christ into a female divinity. Spiritualism also emphasises important links between anti-materialism, personal freedom, and independent thought and progressive moral potential. Spiritualism itself became such a wide-ranging phenomenon from the 1840s onwards with the arrival of American mediums with demonstrations of table-rapping, séances and spirit communication. Rapidly popular with the middle-classes and intelligentsia, whether as sceptics or believers, spiritualism was quickly dominated by the controversy of associations with the occult and the supernatural. De Morgan's interest in esoteric practises focuses on the moral progression of the soul, through life and then after death. This theme is reproduced throughout De Morgan's work with particular emphasis from the 1880s, when her association with William De Morgan brought her into contact with his mother, Sophia De Morgan, a clairvoyant, psychic healer, and prolific spiritualist writer. This engagement with spiritualism affects De Morgan's art so profoundly that it can be characterised by what I shall call her spiritualist aesthetic.

The literature available on De Morgan, has, until recently, been very limited. My research, therefore, has involved locating, transcribing and evaluating unpublished and previously unlisted resources, including letters, articles and manuscripts. This has in turn informed my methodology, which is empirical primary research, providing a substantial new study on De Morgan's works and their relation to science and spiritualism, and also to contextualise De Morgan's contribution to art in the late nineteenth century. It is drawn from primary sources, including previously unpublished manuscripts, diaries, and letters and journals in the De Morgan Foundation archive, as well as from other, more diverse collections and archives. The diary written by De Morgan when she was aged seventeen, in 1872, is an important document of De Morgan's

thoughts and hopes as a young aspiring woman artist. Whilst the diary offers insights into the daily problems encountered by De Morgan at the outset of her career, it is a later publication in which Evelyn collaborates with William De Morgan, which offers striking correlations with the spiritualist and evolutionary themes in her works. Published anonymously in 1909, *The Result of an Experiment*,<sup>8</sup> is a volume of transcriptions purported to develop from spiritualist encounters with spirits from the afterlife. Written in automatic writing sessions, where one or two people hold a pen and begin writing unconsciously, in a trance-state, these were collected over a series of years. They present a complex series of nineteenth-century concerns, specifically addressed from the perspective of the De Morgans. Significantly, many of the transcripts refer to the expansion of empirical science with warnings against blind acceptance of the 'facts' it appears to produce, shown here where an angel points out:

But they say that Science will once again rekindle hope,  
only to be promptly changed into despair by the nature of  
the revelations that can be got. Science can only reveal the  
physical either in your world or ours.<sup>9</sup>

The title of this volume, *The Result of an Experiment*, suggests a scientific hypothesis. This is in keeping with the emphasis of scientific rationality which underpins De Morgan's representations of the passage of the soul after death. The language of empirical science, and its rapid expansion

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<sup>8</sup> [Anon.] E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, and Kent, 1909. This book is quoted by Stirling in *William De Morgan and his Wife*. It is directly referred to as a collaborative work by Evelyn and William De Morgan in Stirling's later work, *The MerryWives of Battersea and Gossip of Three Centuries*, London: Robert Hale, 1956, pp.149-150.

<sup>9</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.147.

from the mid-nineteenth century in Britain is taken up by the spirits who address the De Morgans. In Chapter Two, I will show how *The Result of an Experiment* incorporates a dynamic interchange between spiritualist beliefs and the existence of an eternal soul, and the seemingly incompatible demands of science to provide hypotheses, empirical evidence, and concrete proof of the existence of a transcendental psyche and soul. Late nineteenth-century spiritualism in Britain, therefore, proposes a dialogue between the ideas of incontrovertible ‘fact’ and the evidential and observational premise of science, allied to a desire to establish and to an extent, ‘prove’ the existence of incorporeality and ultimately of the human soul.

The Getty Institute, USA, houses an archive of unpublished correspondence from both Evelyn and William De Morgan,<sup>10</sup> and a scrapbook collection of correspondence and notes, originally in the possession of Stirling, now in the USA<sup>11</sup>, and the DMFA, London, has a large collection of letters, journals, and sketchbooks. These previously unexploited collections provide valuable new insight into the De Morgan’s beliefs, concerns and social context, supporting my proposition of a significant engagement with spiritualism, science and relationships with contemporary artists. Other unpublished resources I have located as part of this research include the order books of the paint company, Roberson<sup>12</sup>, from which De Morgan ordered brushes, paints and canvases. These order books reveal the close connections between key London artists of the period (1880-1919), as well as revealing the extent of interaction between them. Included are the accounts of John Ruskin, Charles Fairfax Murray, Sir

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<sup>10</sup> Letters dated from the late 1890s to 1914, in Special Collections, the Getty Centre, Los Angeles, USA.

<sup>11</sup> This is the Sandford Berger collection, now in the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley, USA. I am indebted to the generosity of Judy Oberhausen, in alerting me to these collections.

<sup>12</sup> These order books are in the Roberson archive collection at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge. Evelyn Pickering’s (later combined with those of William De Morgan) accounts

Coutts Lindsay, John Singer Sargent, W.J. Stillman, Walter Crane, Frank Dicksee, Edward Poynter, Edward Burne-Jones, Roddam Spencer Stanhope, and Mary Lovelace, De Morgan's lifelong friend and Slade contemporary.

Art magazines and journals of the nineteenth century provide both background material, in terms of key discussions of subject-matter, the role of women artists, and exhibition notes, as well as some reviews of De Morgan's exhibitions. These reveal, in general, the hostility of critics towards women artists, although to an extent, by virtue of their discussion of De Morgan and other women artists, at least affirm that they make a contribution; indeed, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, many of these reviews include comments which simultaneously praise De Morgan's achievements whilst deriding her 'masculine' and 'ambitious' style. A key and primary published text detailing De Morgan's life and artistic career is written by her younger sister, A.M.W. Stirling, in the format of a memoir of both William and Evelyn De Morgan's contribution to Victorian culture. *William De Morgan and his Wife* (1922)<sup>13</sup> remains a principal account of Evelyn's life. Unfortunately much of her material is anecdotal, with subjective observations, and after detailed research by Catherine Gordon, for the exhibition catalogue *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings* (1996)<sup>14</sup>, is found to contain many factual inaccuracies, stating, for example, that De Morgan did not exhibit publicly in the last twenty years of her life, when her works were shown at Leighton House in 1901/2, Bruton Street in 1906, Wolverhampton in 1907, and Edith Grove in 1916.<sup>15</sup>

The archival unpublished material documenting Evelyn De Morgan was

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are filed under HKI MS. 136-1993.

<sup>13</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, London: Thornton Butterworth, 1922.

<sup>14</sup> C. Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, London: The De Morgan Foundation, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

predominantly part of A.M.W. (Wilhelmina) Stirling's writings and collection. Stirling's many biographical publications include a study of Evelyn De Morgan's artist uncle, John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (*A Painter of Dreams and Other Bibliographical Stories* (1916), and commentary on nineteenth-century life (*Life's Little Day: Some Tales and Reminiscences*, and *The Merry Wives of Battersea and Gossip of Three Centuries* (1956). *William De Morgan and his Wife* (1922), contains the most detailed account of Evelyn De Morgan's life, from a young child until her death. The title of this book sums up the dominant attitude towards women artists of the period: they were primarily seen as either appendages to their husbands, as in the case of *William De Morgan and his Wife*, where Evelyn De Morgan's own name is negated by her husband's, or they are described only in terms of their relationships to men.<sup>16</sup>

De Morgan's involvement with spiritualism is most clearly documented in *The Result of an Experiment*. The spiritualist journal *Light*, the publication of the London Spiritualist Alliance, has received little or no scholarly interest. However, in my research it provides significant new evidence and documentation on spiritualist attitudes, beliefs and concerns from the 1880s to De Morgan's death in 1919. It contextualises debates on evolution, science, art, and mediumship in relation to De Morgan's paintings of the same period. Although De Morgan's involvement with spiritualist ideas in general has been discussed by Judy Oberhausen<sup>17</sup>, as I argue, De Morgan's work demonstrates a close and committed connection with the ideas promoted by the London Spiritualist Alliance. This group is one of the few spiritualist organisations to survive into the twenty-first century, and the archives are now housed at its base in Kensington, at the renamed College of Psychic Studies. My research has

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<sup>16</sup> See P. G. Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists*, London: The Women's Press, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> J. Oberhausen, "Evelyn De Morgan and Spiritualism" in C. Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, London: De Morgan Foundation, 1996, pp.33-53.

therefore drawn on the archive collection of *Light*, 1881-1920 to provide new insight into Victorian spiritualist beliefs and practices in general, and those most closely linked with De Morgan and her work. Contemporary critics noted that spiritualism was:

The only branch of sciences of the occult which has obtained the popularity implied by the issue of weekly newspapers. The best of these is undoubtedly *Light*, and the perusal of this journal will keep the intending student *au courant* with the progress of the movement throughout the world.<sup>18</sup>

Of particular interest are the numerous articles in *Light* which examine spiritualist themes assimilating science and religion. These will be discussed in the following chapters to demonstrate the evolutionary aesthetic which dominates De Morgan's works from the 1880s. The influence of Sophia De Morgan's *From Matter to Spirit: Ten Years' Experience in Spirit Manifestations*<sup>19</sup>(1863), an exposition on spiritualism and the role of mediumship (especially healing), will also be discussed with reference to Evelyn De Morgan's spiritualist practices, and the relationship of these to her paintings. Evelyn De Morgan's close friend, Emily Ford, had a speech about religion and spiritualism published in *Light*, and many contemporary books discussing the importance and relevance of spiritualism, including those by Sophia De Morgan, were regularly reviewed in the magazine.

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<sup>18</sup> A. Waite, *The Occult Sciences. A Compendium of Transcendental Doctrine and Experiment*, London: Kegan Paul, 1891, p.267.

<sup>19</sup> [S. De Morgan] C.D., *From Matter to Spirit: Ten Years' Experience in Spirit Manifestations, intended as a Guide to Enquirers*, London: Longman and Green, 1863.



Throughout this thesis, I will be drawing on primary sources of spiritualist belief and debate from *Light* to demonstrate the correspondence between De Morgan's themes and iconography in her late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works, and the particular position adopted by those spiritualists who supported the LSA. The debate between the role of science, with particular reference to Darwinism, and theology recurs throughout editions of *Light* from its inception in 1881 to the Great War. This theme is underpinned by the transformation which the sub-title of the magazine undergoes. In the original format, in 1881, the magazine is called *Light. A Journal devoted to the Highest Interests of Humanity, both Here and Hereafter*. The early version is characterised by this humanist agenda, highlighted by the use of such grandiose language. However, by 1887, there is a striking difference in emphasis, which, I propose, directly results from the importance given to the concept of empirical science. The sub-title itself underscores the prominence of science in the field of spiritualism, as it becomes: *Light. A Journal of Psychical, Occult and Mystical Research*, clearly reflecting its scientific impetus. This synthesis of science and spiritualism is extended into De Morgan's work, and I will show how the ideas broached in *Light* were to have a shaping influence on De Morgan's paintings.

It is not just the paradigm of scientific language which spiritualism adopts in the late nineteenth century, but it also takes up the key intellectual debates and theories of the period. These debates can be shown to inform and shape De Morgan's works, particularly with regard to spiritualist assimilation of evolutionary themes. These ideas will all be discussed in depth in the following chapters, but I will maintain that the emphasis on Darwin's agnostic (later atheist) prognosis of evolutionary progression, is countered in *Light* by the writings of the natural scientist Alfred Russel Wallace<sup>20</sup>, a scientist of

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<sup>20</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism. An Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection with some*

international renown as well as a prominent spiritualist.

Approaches to De Morgan's work have varied, as I have suggested between a hostile criticism, acknowledgement of talent and professionalism, and, more recently, scholarly re-appraisals which range from biographical revision, feminist methods, and through the examination of the nineteenth-century artistic context. The most recent publication specifically examining De Morgan's work is a collaborative project by the De Morgan Foundation,<sup>21</sup> with essays by Judy Oberhausen and Patricia Yates. *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, was published in 1996, to coincide with a major retrospective of De Morgan's works at the Russell Cotes Gallery, Bournemouth. It includes a useful chronology, catalogue entries and biographical data, along with essays dealing with specific elements of iconography and interpretation of De Morgan's work.

Patricia Yates's essay focuses on the use of literary sources in De Morgan's often complex allegories, demonstrating the eclectic and erudite nature of De Morgan's approach to her career as a professional artist, and also drawing attention to De Morgan's personalisation of existing genres, such as the classicism displayed in some of her earliest works, inspiration through the courtly tales favoured by the Pre-Raphaelites, and the more dense and religious spiritual symbolism. Yates remarks that:

For nearly thirty years she [De Morgan] found her main impetus in an amazing range of literary sources from the 9th century BC to the early 20th century AD. She did not attempt to put the subjects in a historical context or in a contemporary one but rather placed them all in a loosely

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*of its Applications*, London and New York: Macmillan, 1889.

<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to Catherine Gordon, curator for the De Morgan Foundation, and Jon Catleugh, Chairman of the De Morgan Foundation, for their unlimited help and support in my research.

classical setting.<sup>22</sup>

Although Yates claims that De Morgan's work is ahistorical, I will demonstrate that De Morgan's work is, in fact, fundamentally grounded in contemporary themes and concerns. I will show that De Morgan uses innovative approaches to existing subject-matter and iconography in nineteenth-century art, and that a close analysis of her works reveals the extent to which she draws on the contemporary preoccupations of her period.

Oberhausen's "Evelyn De Morgan and Spiritualism" is an overview of the impact of spiritualism on De Morgan's works, and provides a platform for further investigation of De Morgan's links with spiritualism. Oberhausen argues that De Morgan's work is a response to a wide range of late nineteenth-century issues. She notes that a "more accurate picture emerges of an artist who, in many of her works, responded sharply to the major intellectual issues of her time: materialism, spiritualism, religious doubt, and modern warfare."<sup>23</sup>

Oberhausen's essay explores a range of De Morgan's works and their general relation to the spiritualist movement of the period, and emphasises the relationship to De Morgan's writings in *The Result of an Experiment*. This thesis, however, aims to make the connections between spiritualist beliefs and De Morgan's work explicit, through the use of archive material I have located in the College of Psychic Studies, London (previously known as the London Spiritualist Association), as well as from the De Morgans' own publication *The Result of an Experiment*, and from contemporary spiritualist publications, by writers such as Sophia De Morgan and A.R. Wallace, I will demonstrate that

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<sup>22</sup> P. Yates, "Evelyn De Morgan's use of literary sources in her paintings", in C.Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.53.

<sup>23</sup> J. Oberhausen, "Evelyn De Morgan and Spiritualism" in C.Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.33.

there were close connections between the De Morgans and specifically the ideas promoted by the LSA, as well as groups such as the Society for Psychical Research, and show how De Morgan's work is underpinned by these interests.

Oberhausen's second essay in the catalogue, "A Horror of War" explores the De Morgan's concerns with the impact of both the Boer war, and the First World War, drawing on primary material from *The Result of an Experiment*, the De Morgan's political beliefs, and the translation of these into ongoing themes incorporated into De Morgan's work. Whilst Oberhausen examines the pacifist and anti-materialism in De Morgan's work and relates this to the impact of these wars, I am concerned with De Morgan's striking use of transfigured Christ figures in the new form of female deities, as a direct result of De Morgan's anti-war stance. I will argue that these feminised Christ figures are a continuation of De Morgan's earlier spiritualist themes, and are drawn from her visual repertoire of a utopian soul and its evolutionary progress. Oberhausen's current research involves an examination of the impact of the nineteenth-century feminist and Renaissance specialist and art critic, Anna Jameson, and the works of Evelyn De Morgan, and is due for publication this year.<sup>24</sup> This research into this area will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Several scholars are now working on research into Evelyn De Morgan, including Elise Lawton Smith, from Millsaps College, Mississippi<sup>25</sup>, whose book about the life and works of Evelyn De Morgan, *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body*, is due for publication 2001/2. Both Smith and Oberhausen have also published essays on aspects of De Morgan's work in

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<sup>24</sup> Judy Oberhausen has given a great deal of help, advice and support in my research, and I am indebted to her for allowing me access to her research, including quotations from unpublished material. Her current draft research paper is called *Evelyn De Morgan and Anna Jameson: A Meeting of Minds*.

<sup>25</sup> Elise Lawton Smith has also provided help, interest and support in the progress of this thesis, allowing me access to draft copies of her manuscript on the works of Evelyn De

journals, including Smith's survey "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan" in *Woman's Art Journal*, 1998<sup>26</sup>, and Oberhausen's "Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and Spiritualism: An Interpretive Link" in *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*<sup>27</sup> and "Evelyn Pickering De Morgan at the Columbia Museum of Art" in *Collections: The Magazine of the Columbia Museum of Art and the Gibbes Planetarium*<sup>28</sup>. In these early essays, Oberhausen proposes strong links between the subjects and technique of De Morgan's work, and dominant contemporary discourses, such as religion, socialism, and the perceived role of the artist, within the framework of rapid social and political transformation. Whilst acknowledging Oberhausen's contribution to the biographical study of De Morgan, I will argue, using new research, that De Morgan's work has much closer links to spiritualism than has been previously suggested, and that the principal influences in her art from the 1880s are evolutionary science and spiritualism.

Smith's approach to De Morgan is to explore feminist issues in De Morgan's art and life, examining thematic links between De Morgan's representation of the female figure and patriarchal constraints which circumscribed women's lives in the nineteenth century. Smith draws on contemporary material, including literature and art, particularly the poetry of women writers, to illustrate the sometimes innovative and transgressive nature of De Morgan's original re-presentation of women figures constructed through allegory. This follows part of the tradition established by feminist historians and

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Morgan, *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body*.

<sup>26</sup> Elise Lawton Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan", in *Woman's Art Journal*, 18, Fall 1997/Winter 1998, pp.3-11.

<sup>27</sup> Judy Oberhausen, "Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and Spiritualism: An Interpretive Link", in *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, New Series III, Spring 1994, pp.1-19.

<sup>28</sup> Judy Oberhausen, "Evelyn Pickering De Morgan at the Columbia Museum of Art", in *Collections: The Magazine of the Columbia Museum of Art and the Gibbes Planetarium*, 6, Summer 1994, pp.10-17.

writers, such as Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Jan Marsh and Deborah Cherry,<sup>29</sup> which engages with the re-appraisal of nineteenth-century women artists who have been disregarded and overlooked in art historical accounts.<sup>30</sup> These have produced valuable and critical new perspectives on artists who have been hitherto marginalised. Pamela Gerrish Nunn describes De Morgan as:

An independent-minded woman from her student days,  
[who] can be seen searching for characters off the beaten  
track, though she still Europeanised the antique world,  
[looking] for different approaches to familiar figures.<sup>31</sup>

Cherry addresses the institutional, domestic and public practices relating to women artists in the Victorian era. Cherry's methodology is to provide a survey of nineteenth-century women artists, through a range of criteria including the role of the family, domestic life, training and institutions, politics and cultural discourses. In references to De Morgan, Cherry, like Gerrish Nunn and Marsh, form a commentary based on Stirling's flawed account, rather than other primary source material, effecting a reinforcement of some elements of the inaccurate assertions made by Stirling to perpetuate a particular view of De

<sup>29</sup> See P. Gerrish Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists*, 1987, Jan Marsh, *Women and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, 1989, D. Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists*, 1993. Deborah Cherry is currently writing an essay on the link between spiritualism and women artists of the nineteenth-century, focussing on the life and works of Emily Ford, a friend and contemporary of Evelyn De Morgan. It will be published October 2000, in *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, 1850-1900*, Routledge.

<sup>30</sup> There is currently a wide variety of on-going scholarly research into aspects of the De Morgan family, including an account of the influence of Professor Augustus De Morgan's theories of mathematics, and Sophia De Morgan's life, in *Angles of Reflection. Logic and a Mother's Love*, J. Richards, New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000. The primary interest shown by researchers in De Morgan is in her role as a professional woman artist, in an era dominated by male interests.

<sup>31</sup> P. Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting*, London:

Morgan. Some of Stirling's assertions have been challenged in this thesis, through a re-appraisal of unpublished source material and recent discoveries of empirical evidence relating to De Morgan.

The following chapters examine De Morgan's work in relation to specific scientific and spiritualist themes, ideas and iconography. I will examine how De Morgan explores the notion of the soul's progression in her work through the themes raised in *The Results of an Experiment*, such as here, where an angel declares to De Morgan "we struggle by means of an art that is lame and faltering, to keep alive the flame of immortality untainted by a knowledge burdened with death."<sup>32</sup> I propose that De Morgan negotiates established patriarchal motifs and themes in art to produce a specifically female representation of the soul's journey towards perfection which forms the impetus to her work. This concept will be explored in the following chapters through a close analysis of De Morgan's work and its correspondence with spiritualist and scientific themes.

In order to re-appraise De Morgan's work with reference to the impact of spiritualism, this thesis is organised thematically, examining areas of her work which demonstrate the dialogue between evolutionary theories and scientific positivism in general, through the development and expansion of spiritualist beliefs and practices. In Chapter One, "The Making of a Woman Artist: Evelyn De Morgan and the Late Victorians," De Morgan's family life, education and artistic training will be examined in the context of mid-nineteenth century discourses of science and religion. I will show how dominant discourses of science, religion and social mores can be seen as integral to the themes and subject matter in De Morgan's works. The early development of her work, although dominated by classical style and subject-matter, reveals an interest in

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Scolar Press, 1996, p.155.

the limitations imposed on women as well as the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. I will demonstrate how the background and social circle of bourgeois intelligentsia influenced De Morgan's development as a woman artist, with specific reference to her close links with the spiritualist movement in London in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

In Chapter Two, "Evolution and the Transmigration of the Soul" I propose that De Morgan's art is directly influenced by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and also of Alfred Russel Wallace, key scientists of the period. Charles Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* produced an evolutionary paradigm which influenced all areas of nineteenth-century life<sup>32</sup>, creating vigorous religious, social and philosophical debates and pervading every aspect of life. Furthermore, Darwin's evolutionary model of progress towards perfection was disseminated through a variety of metaphors of evolution, which are manifested in De Morgan's visions of the soul and its passage of incremental progress through life and after death. I shall argue that, in order to construct and maintain this powerful spiritualist paradigm, De Morgan explores themes of life and death, change and continuity in allegories of transformation, from darkness into light, and from physical death into spiritual rebirth.

Drawing on the scientific models which informed the second half of the nineteenth century, De Morgan work shows an engagement with theological issues, and specifically produces, through her art, a critique of both patriarchy and orthodox religions. In Chapter Three, "Breaking the Code: De Morgan's

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<sup>32</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.131.

<sup>33</sup> This premise is documented by a number of scholars, including Gillian Beer, who investigates this model in relation to literature of the period in *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1983, and by Janet Oppenheim who looks at evolutionary metaphors in spiritualism in Victorian Britain, in *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England*,



Re-Vision of Christianity” I will argue that De Morgan creates a specifically female artistic iconography, in a fresh approach to both traditional Christian doctrine, and contemporary cultural conceptions of women. Moreover, her employment and subversion of traditional Christian iconography provides a critique of patriarchy as well as specific creeds. This is underpinned by the transcripts in *The Result of an Experiment*, which demonstrate De Morgan’s disillusionment with Christianity, and new engagement with spiritualist doctrines of moral and spiritual development as an alternative. I will also explore the importance of nineteenth-century reinterpretations of Plato in De Morgan’s work, with particular reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave, as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. Finally, I will revise current critical readings of De Morgan’s Christian subjects by Oberhausen and Yates, which propose an uncritical link between traditional Christian iconography and De Morgan’s works, and instead demonstrate that in fact, De Morgan’s martyr and saint figures are more controversial, using an appropriation of traditional figures, in particular, the figure of Christ, which are transfigured into messianic female divinities. I will show that by referring directly to Platonic ideals, De Morgan’s spiritualist aesthetic re-interprets the Christian trinity with specifically female, and sometimes pagan, goddesses, in a striking revision of nineteenth-century artistic conventions.

De Morgan’s concepts of transfiguration and subversion of established iconography continues in Chapter Four, “Witches, Occultism and nineteenth-century Spiritualism”. Through close textual analysis I will establish to what extent De Morgan’s numerous representations of occult figures are informed by, and become part of, the currency of spiritualist interests in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, De Morgan’s work incorporates some innovative

departures from contemporary perceptions of the occult, and in particular, its relationship to women and political and social power. Chapter Four also explores the iconographical links in De Morgan's art, as she assimilates contemporary concepts of science with the metaphysical. De Morgan attempts to resolve any conflicts between science and spiritualism in her paintings by incorporating current scientific notions in order to support her expression of the soul after death in its state of evolution towards perfection. Representations of witches and occult figures are used to embody codes of esoteric practices which De Morgan associates in her art with the female sex, including healing, mysticism, and clairvoyancy. I will argue that De Morgan visualises and establishes a new iconography for women, by showing them as positive and courageous figures, in the roles of witches, healers, mystics and martyrs in direct opposition to the dominant model of occult figures expressed in paintings by many of De Morgan's contemporaries.

Chapter Five, "The Quest for Immortality: Myths of Water and the Evolution of the Soul" focuses on De Morgan's innovative use of iconography, allegory and the re-working of established literary and artistic sources to explore concepts of spiritual rebirth and metamorphosis through the female form. I propose that water imagery is central to De Morgan's articulation of spiritual enlightenment and resurrection of the soul after death. Water symbolism has original connotations in De Morgan's work; as I will demonstrate, functioning simultaneously as a transparent medium through which an alternative world can be explored and imagined, and also invoking a distinctively maternal (therefore female) aspect, serving as primordial womb or matrix, which in De Morgan's presentation of symbols suggests both life and death and rebirth. De Morgan's iconography of associated water products such as shells, mermaids and associated legends, are connected to a mystical,

esoteric plane of existence, as well as the popular symbolism of female sexuality and fertility. De Morgan's work will be examined within the context of nineteenth-century literary and artistic presentations of images related to water, in particular Hans Christian Andersen's popular story of *The Little Mermaid*. This short story generated at least four paintings by De Morgan, and is full of references to the exclusively human attribute of an immortal soul. De Morgan's water and mermaid paintings appear to have close correspondences with the nineteenth-century scientific endeavour to categorise species, and also the Darwinian evolutionary model, translated in De Morgan's mermaid paintings into a progressive narrative of the developing soul.

Themes of spiritual enlightenment and female emancipation co-exist in many of De Morgan's works. Early works in the decade of the 1870s show a marked influence of Edward Poynter, the first principal of the Slade School of art, in their studied draughtsmanship, careful composition and classical inspiration. However, by the 1880s and De Morgan's engagement with spiritualism, her work is characterised by new and innovative codes of meaning. These are expressed primarily through allegorical themes, symbolic use of colour and challenging re-presentations of existing subjects, particularly through the use of the female form as a vehicle with which to represent an unorthodox alternative to the model of traditional Christian convictions.

De Morgan is an important artist, whose work is characterised by the incorporation of aspects of science and spiritualism, and a reappraisal of the role of women in the second half of the nineteenth century. Following the interest in De Morgan generated by of the 1996 exhibition, this thesis seeks to examine the extent to which spiritualism and science shape and inform De Morgan's work in the period 1870-1919.

## Chapter One

### The Making of a Woman Artist

#### 1.1 Women and Art

Mary Evelyn Pickering was born on 30 August 1855, at the family home in Upper Grosvenor Street, London. Born in the middle of the century, De Morgan was to grow up and practise art as a profession in an epoch of dramatic cultural transformation. The themes, style and motivation behind her mature art are anticipated in early writings and drawings, and are shaped and informed by contemporary influences on De Morgan including family, art training, and social circle.

The expansion of empirical science, based on observation, experimentation and material evidence directly corresponds to the perceived crisis of traditional orthodox religious doctrine in the Victorian era. The confrontation between the competing and ostensibly exclusive discourses of science and religion produced wide-ranging repercussions. One of these is the notable proliferation of alternatives to traditional Anglican or Catholic doctrine, in particular, spiritualism, which was to have a deep and lasting impact on De Morgan's work, were to offer new expressions of systems of belief and meaning in such a dramatically changing society.

In order to assess the impact of science and spiritualism on De Morgan's art, it is necessary to establish the context of dominant social ideas and background, including the influence of both her own family, and of the De Morgan family, on Evelyn De Morgan's work. Prominent intellectuals of the period, such as John Ruskin<sup>1</sup> J.S. Mill,

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<sup>1</sup> Sophia De Morgan recalls meetings with Carlyle, Ruskin and F.D. Morris, in her memoirs, *Threescore Years and Ten. Reminiscences of S.E. De Morgan* (ed.), M. De Morgan, London: Robert Bentley, 1895, pp.226-227. Stirling also comments on the spiritualist connection between Sophia De Morgan and John Ruskin, regarding an exorcism and séance, A.M.W. Stirling, *Ghosts Vivisected*, London: Robert Hale, 1957, pp.165-166. For further anecdotal references to Sophia De Morgan's circle who were also spiritualists, see S. Reynolds, *William Blake-Richmond. An Artist's Life 1842-1921*, London: Michael Russell, 1995, p.99.

Lady Byron<sup>2</sup>, Elizabeth Fry, Anna Jameson and Thomas Carlyle, were close friends of Evelyn's future parents-in-law, Sophia and Augustus De Morgan<sup>3</sup>, engaging in debate around civil rights, religion, and the moral and social development of society. A pioneering spiritualist medium, as well as women's rights activist, Sophia De Morgan was to have a profound impact on the art produced by Evelyn De Morgan. Both Sophia and her husband, Professor Augustus De Morgan, campaigned vigorously and successfully for the opening of new educational establishments, including Queen's and Bedford Colleges for women, and the University of London, as well as for prison reform and for women's rights in general. Yet despite these advancements, the dominant ideologies of class, expectations of behaviour, and above all, the discrimination between the perception of 'feminine' and 'masculine' codes of conduct, outlook and expectations, remained, at least until the last decades of the nineteenth century, remarkably rigid. In various forms, these institutional and class-based discriminations were to shape and inform Evelyn De Morgan's professional training as an artist, and also, importantly, the content and structure of her work. As I will argue, her response to the dominant criteria of masculine and feminine codes is mediated through her engagement with spiritualist tenets, and De Morgan's feminist agenda is an integral part of her spiritualist aesthetic.

Even for those pioneering women involved in campaigning for educational rights for women there remained some discord and uncertainty about the potentially negative long-term effects of an education on equal terms with men. As a young woman in the 1840s Sophia De Morgan

worked [...] upon methods of improving the conditions of workhouses, asylums and prisons, in which latter movement she

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<sup>2</sup> Stainton Moses, president of the LSA, notes that this friendship with Byron had common interests in "all questions of social and benevolent work, and in especial degree where they affected her own sex, as for instance, in that the inequality of the laws relating to woman and the difficulties in which they placed her in cooperating in the business of life". "Memoir of the Late Mrs De Morgan", in *Light*, 30 January, 1892, p.58.

<sup>3</sup> These friendships are noted in anecdotes throughout Sophia De Morgan's memoirs, see S. De Morgan, *Threescore Years and Ten. Reminiscences of S.E. De Morgan* (ed.), M. De Morgan, London: Richard Bentley, 1895.

aided Elizabeth Fry. She initiated a Society for providing playgrounds for the children of the slums. She had also a large share in the formation of Bedford College in 1849: and, always an advocate for the higher education of women, she soon persuaded her husband to overcome his masculine prejudices on this subject and to champion the cause of Woman's Suffrage.<sup>4</sup>

However, despite championing these philanthropic causes, the support of higher education for women was problematic. In Sophia De Morgan's own recollections of a life filled with campaigns against social injustice and in support of reform, whilst working as a prominent spiritualist medium, she is clearly still deeply influenced by contemporary concepts of feminine codes of behaviour and expectations, arguing that over-exposure to education for young women resulted in "the brain and nerve-destroying work of passing for examination".<sup>5</sup> As a role model for Evelyn De Morgan, particularly through the shared interests in spiritualism and mediumship, Sophia De Morgan's views on women appear both revolutionary, in her involvement with social reform and suffrage campaign, yet reactive in the limits imposed by contemporary codes of female behaviour and expectation. Sophia De Morgan demonstrates the then current pseudo-scientific views on the supposed differences in anatomy and therefore function of the female body as compared to the 'stronger brain of men'. The conviction that women and men are polarised in outlook, form and function echoes throughout nineteenth-century publications. Diana Craik, an acquaintance of Sophia De Morgan, whose work was familiar with William and Evelyn, was a popular and widely read didactic novelist of the mid-nineteenth century, whose self-righteous and upright characters are mocked by William De Morgan in a playful poem.<sup>6</sup> Craik also published a guide to women, *A*

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<sup>4</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, p.32.

<sup>5</sup> De Morgan, S., *From Matter to Spirit. The Result of Ten Years' Experience in Spirit Manifestations*, London: Longman, Green & Roberts, 1863, pp.330-31.

<sup>6</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, p.67. Stirling reproduces an early poem written by William De Morgan, a comic re-write of Dante's *Divina Commedia* in which he amusingly relates the shock of an encounter in one of the circles of purgatory with several of Craik's protagonists:

*Woman's Thoughts about Women*, 1858, which underpins the principal expectations of female achievement and outlook. Like others opposed to the concept of new roles and power for women, Craik underpins her argument by reference to the Bible as an authoritative basis for her assertions, beginning with a diatribe against the campaign for equality of the sexes:

Equally blasphemous, and perhaps even more harmful, is the outcry about "the equality of the sexes:" the frantic attempt to force women, many of whom are either ignorant of or unequal for their own duties - into the position and duties of men. A pretty state of matters would ensue! Who that has ever listened for two hours to the verbose confused inanities of a ladies' committee, would immediately go and give his vote for a female House of Commons? ... You [men] need not be much afraid lest this loud acclaim for "women's rights" should ever end in pushing you from your stools, in counting-house, college, or elsewhere. No: equality of the sexes is not in the nature of things. Man and woman were made for, and not like one another.<sup>7</sup>

The possibility of women and men competing at the same level is repeatedly ridiculed or dismissed. For De Morgan, as a serious and professional artist, these deeply-held beliefs

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"I was Agatha's Husband's Wife, an awful bore,  
A woeful an abominable bore",  
"And I was '*Mrs Halifax, lady*,' cried another.  
Then a third and smaller one -  
"And I was Muriel in the self-same novel  
As she who last addressed thee." Then they all  
With one accord, set up a mournful song -  
"Go tell Miss Mulock [Craik] to ha' done, and make  
Night hideous with her bores no more!"

<sup>7</sup> D.M. Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, London: Hurst & Blackett, 1858, pp.5-6.

about the assumed fundamental inequalities of male and female capacity, became an obstacle which she had to overcome, yet De Morgan, was, as I shall show, privileged to have an unusually wide-ranging education that ultimately enabled her to compete for a place at art school which demanded a high level of intellectual knowledge.

The traditional roles of men and women were re-affirmed by many prominent nineteenth-century writers, both men and women. The dominant attitudes to women and education served to exclude many potential women artists from a professional career. Perhaps most notable in his vociferous attack on the concept of educated independent women was John Ruskin, who argued that women were fundamentally different from men, in his series of lectures, *Sesame and Lilies*, published in 1865, where he argued that woman's "intellect is not for invention and creation, but of sweet ordering, arrangement and decision".<sup>8</sup>

Such perceptions of women as the weaker sex, who should lack ambition and assertiveness, influenced and constructed an intransigent model of femininity at odds with the desire for an education, a profession or even a position in the public arena. The subject of work was of importance to both Evelyn and her younger sister, Wilhelmina, yet they clearly felt frustrated by the expectations of society for upper-middle class women. Stirling's unpublished journals (1876-1892) reveal the introspective conflict about these class and gender limitations:

Only one characteristic always remains: the need of work. And the utter pointlessness of existence without it [...] to idle away day after day [...] makes me wretched. The secret of happiness is to have motive in life. That is why men are so far happier than women, even a profession which is drudgery and has little mental interest, can be better than the frittering away of daily life in little disconnected sections which have no real point.<sup>9</sup>

This indictment of the limiting confinement of the lives of middle-class women is shared

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<sup>8</sup> J. Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens", in *Sesame and Lilies*, London: George Allen; 1865; repr. 1906, p.155.

<sup>9</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, Unpublished MS notes for autobiography, vol 2, 1886-1897, DMFA.



by her sister, Evelyn De Morgan, through the vehicle of automatic writing in the transcripts of *The Result of an Experiment*. There are frequent messages encouraging her to devote herself to hard work, such as where a spirit declares “I am glad I worked with all my might. Continue; it is the best thing on earth, that hard incessant struggle”.<sup>10</sup> De Morgan’s aspirations to become a professional artist are also outlined in her diary. Most of the entries in her diary include her progress in painting (usually getting up to paint for two hours before breakfast at seven each morning), underpinned by her frequent references to time wasted, for example on 17 August, 1872, she notes:

Not down till half past 7, worked a good hour before breakfast. In the morning worked 4 hours in Grosvenor Square and nearly 3 in afternoon. Went to Madame Coulon’s, changed my dress before going, which was needless and wasted time.<sup>11</sup>

De Morgan also rejected the accepted entry into society as a *débutante*, declaring to her mother that “no one shall drag me out with a halter round my neck to sell me”.<sup>12</sup> However, De Morgan’s determination to have a career was clearly in opposition to those deeply entrenched expectations which circumscribed women’s lives.

For Evelyn De Morgan, a female born into a wealthy and influential upper-class family, to study, train for and to choose art as a profession entailed battling through a bewildering and entrenched set of institutional and ideological objections and obstacles. However, I propose that these very difficulties consolidated De Morgan’s adult political position, and encouraged her to develop and maintain interests in feminism, anti-materialism, and later, spiritualism. The perceived lifestyle of a young, upper-class woman was to follow an established and conventional pattern. De Morgan’s mother expected

A girl to be a companion and a pride to her, one who would fulfil the

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<sup>10</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Entry: Friday, 17 August 1872.

<sup>12</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, p.181.

accepted role of the young women of her day. Well-educated, well-read and well-bred, she would, in due course, 'come out' in the usual fashion: she would take part in innocent pleasures in really good society: eventually she would marry satisfactorily to become a model wife and mother, and finally go down to the grave beloved, revered - and quickly forgotten.<sup>13</sup>

Evelyn De Morgan, however, had a very different vision of her future and vocation, which was to cause much opposition both within her own family and, later, as a proficient artist competing in the same public arena as her male contemporaries. Owing to her mother's enthusiasm for education and knowledge, De Morgan received an unorthodox education for a woman, and also encouragement from her uncle, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Roddam Spencer Stanhope. However, the gap between the accepted occupation of sketching for a young woman and the life of a professional artist was a significant one. D.M. Craik expresses the commonly held views on women as artists, which De Morgan's parents also expounded, when she compares the woman artist with the writer:

I put art first, as being the most difficult - perhaps, in its highest form, almost impossible to women. There are many reasons for this: in the course of education necessary for a painter, in the not unnatural repugnance that is felt to women's drawing from "the life," attending anatomical dissections, and so on - all which studies are indispensable to one who would plumb the depths and scale the heights of the most arduous of the liberal arts. Whether any woman will ever do this, remains yet to be proved.<sup>14</sup>

Through establishing a successful and noted career, Evelyn De Morgan was gaining more than the respect of the art world: she was breaking new boundaries in the possibilities of

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<sup>13</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, pp.174-75.

<sup>14</sup> D.M.Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, p.50.

women as eminent specialists in a field dominated by men. I will demonstrate that De Morgan's work is both informed by her feminist agenda, and expressed through her belief in spiritualism as an alternative to Christian orthodoxy.

## 1.2 "I want a daughter, not an artist!"<sup>15</sup> Transgressing expectations

The background to De Morgan's preoccupation with art as a vehicle to express spiritualist themes can be found in both her childhood interests, and, later, in the social circle of artists, and the De Morgan family. Evelyn's family, the Pickerings, were part of a wealthy and conservative upper-middle class. Evelyn's father, Percival Pickering, was educated in the family tradition at Eton, where he was a close friend of William Gladstone, the future Prime Minister. He was an active and successful Q.C. when he married Anna Maria Wilhelmina Spencer-Stanhope in 1855. Evelyn's mother came from an old family in Yorkshire. Her mother, Evelyn's maternal grandmother, was Lady Elizabeth Spencer-Stanhope. She had two elder sisters who were pupils of Thomas Gainsborough. Sketching and water colour painting was, of course, part of the accepted education for upper and middle class women until the end of the nineteenth century, although this was considered very different to the role of a professional artist, who accepted commissions for work. Stirling notes that Elizabeth herself did not develop any particular talent as an artist, but her second son, John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope, became a notable first generation Pre-Raphaelite painter, who participated in the design and execution of the mural paintings in the Oxford Union in 1858, alongside Rossetti, Arthur Hughes, Burne-Jones, William Morris, J.H. Pollen and Val Prinsep. Burne-Jones described him as "the finest colourist in Europe [...] his works show an almost Southern love of deep, glowing colour, and a dainty imagery which drifted into fairy-tales so that he was aptly described as 'a painter of dreams'."<sup>16</sup> The close relationship between Evelyn and her uncle was an

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<sup>15</sup> Anna Maria Pickering, quoted in A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, p.174.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143. Burne-Jones's comment was later taken by Stirling to provide the title for her biographical study of John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, *A Painter of Dreams and*

important influence on her later work. Roddam Spencer Stanhope introduced De Morgan to the Renaissance works in Florence, where he brought a villa, and also to the first generation Pre-Raphaelite circle, where she was to form lifelong friendships with Rossetti, Watts and Holman Hunt.

Evelyn's mother, Anna Maria, also had a drawing master, but, as for her mother Lady Elizabeth, her tuition was conceived as part of the overall framework for an educated lady's accomplishments, and she did not proceed beyond producing "promising sketches and drawings".<sup>17</sup> When she met and married Percy Pickering, they moved to Upper Grosvenor Street, where Evelyn's birth was followed by two brothers, Spencer and Rowland, and her younger sister, Wilhelmina, who was to become the author of biographical memoirs of Evelyn and William De Morgan's achievements. Anna Maria Pickering organised an unconventional education for her children, employing well-educated tutors in preference to the "narrowing influence of governesses".<sup>18</sup> This education provides an important element in De Morgan's later choices of themes and subject-matter in her art, enabling her to draw upon a knowledge and interest in ancient Greek and eastern mythologies, as well as pagan and Celtic narratives. However, this type of education had shortcomings, as Stirling points out in her unpublished journals:

I always think it is a bad thing for the mother to have to act the governess to her children, I think she should teach them all the higher and more interesting parts of their education (if she is capable of doing so)[...] but the common drudgery of lessons should at any cost be avoided.<sup>19</sup>

Stirling draws attention to the high standard of education which Evelyn received, sharing in the governesses and tutors organised for her brother, Spencer. As a daughter, Evelyn was in the unusual position of receiving the same early education as her brother,

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*other Biographical Studies*, London and New York: Bodley Head, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.143.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144.

<sup>19</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, unpublished MS, *Autobiography*, vol. 3, DMFA.

Spencer. This included Greek, Latin, French, German, History, Science, Italian, Classical literature and Mythology. However, alongside this material which was also dominated by reading of literature and poetry of the Romantic movement, De Morgan was also encouraged to explore scientific ideas of observation and experiment. Anna Maria Pickering was also committed to reading and expanding self-knowledge principally through reading literature and yet also understanding the expanding discipline of empirical science. To make an ostensibly pedantic science text palatable to her children, she

Wrote for them volumes which read like a fairytale: she described the wonderful prehistoric world ... where strange beasts abounded, ... on the discoveries of astronomy, the grand riddle of the stars which looked like glittering dust strewn over the dome of heaven; the marvels of chemistry, of geology, of the application of many recent discoveries.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, this childhood introduction to science through the analogy of exploration, romantic poetry and scientific innovation, anticipates the themes of science and its significance in the metaphysical realm which was to later inform De Morgan's works. De Morgan's mother could synthesise the pragmatism of empirical science with astonishing marvels and mystery of the cosmos which could then be attributed to a divine origin. Anna Maria Pickering's re-presentation of science and the world to her children, was informed by the popular mid-nineteenth-century concepts of natural theology. This in turn serves to underpin much of De Morgan's later evolutionary paintings, which represent the developing soul before or just after death, as having close links with its earthly, corporeal surroundings, in the form of flowers, shells, and rocks for example.

This broad and privileged educational and of course, cultural background is central to the recurring themes and sources of De Morgan's complex subject-matter in art, including the sometimes obscure literary allusions for which she is sometimes criticised. The accommodation of the relatively new advances in science to the arts and humanities

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<sup>20</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.144. Stirling stresses the breadth of Evelyn's education, and it is in De Morgan's childhood years that the correspondence between science and the arts is established and encouraged through her mother's interests.

studied by De Morgan mark the synthesis of the expanding empiricism with metaphysical concepts which were to inform all of De Morgan's adult work. It also underscores the imperative of a good education, usually denied a female, in the undertaking of a professional career as a serious artist. However, despite this apparent parity of education for the sons and daughters of the Pickering family, a codicil in Percival Pickering's will, added in 1870, reveals the different attitudes to male and female education. Pickering writes:

[for] any child who may then be under the age of 21 years, and my wish is that each of my dear sons may be education at Eton, and at the University either of Oxford or Cambridge, and my wish also is that neither of my dear daughters be sent to any School whatever which I hereby forbid but that they each receive a Home education.<sup>21</sup>

However, within two years, Evelyn had persuaded her father to allow her to attend the newly formed South Kensington National Art Training School. This was part of a campaign to become an artist which dated from her early childhood. In the Pickering family, as with most upper and middle-class families, art was acknowledged to be a necessary accoutrement in a young lady's repertoire of cultured and refined accomplishments. De Morgan's perseverance in artistic endeavour was tempered by the Pickering's insistence that it must be "art kept within proper bounds".<sup>22</sup> They saw artists as being too close to tradesmen "who wore long hair and impossible clothes"<sup>23</sup> and, of course, was presumed to be even more absurd for as an activity for a woman. Despite the artistic success of Evelyn's uncle, Roddam Spencer-Stanhope, in the family, he was "to be tolerated, not approved" and was referred to indulgently as "poor Roddy".<sup>24</sup> When

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<sup>21</sup> Will of Percival Andrée Pickering, probated 2nd December, 1876. 2nd Codicil, dated 2nd January, 1870.

<sup>22</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.173.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.173.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174.

Evelyn proclaimed her wish to follow in his footsteps, her mother's reaction was very revealing: "I want a daughter, not an artist!"<sup>25</sup> as if the two positions were mutually exclusive. In an era when daughters were expected only to marry successfully, and then become mothers, Evelyn, like several other women artists and writers of her generation,<sup>26</sup> was transgressing the boundaries of expectations in her quest to become an artist.

Evelyn defied her parents' expectations, and, according to Stirling, painted in secret, in a room so close to her parents' that she had to block up her door with paper to prevent the emission of paint smells. This kind of anecdote is used by Stirling to produce a particular type of artist-narrative, however, it is unlikely that De Morgan could have acquired paints, brushes and canvases without her parent's knowledge. By the age of twelve she was using oil paints, until the paraphernalia of tools and canvases meant that she was detected by her mother, whereupon she declared that "she could not live without painting".<sup>27</sup> De Morgan's earliest works include poems, plays and stories<sup>28</sup>. Drawn to stories of romance and tragedy, and apparently influenced by the writings of the Brontës, and Christina Rossetti, some of De Morgan's early poems contain themes which are developed and persistent in her later paintings. The poem called *The Angel of Death*, written at about the age of twelve, signals the preoccupation with death and the afterlife which characterises De Morgan's spiritualist-influenced works:

My love lies deep  
Under the ground;  
The winter winds  
Blow cold around

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>26</sup> Other Pre-Raphaelite women artists who struggled against opposition, and were often overshadowed by the male artists in their families, include Emma Sandys, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Rosa Brett, Lucy Madox Brown, Marianne Stokes, Eleanor Brickdale, Kate Bunce and Julia Margaret Cameron, to list just a few. See J.Marsh and P.Gerrish Nunn (eds.), *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, Manchester: Manchester City Art Galleries, 1998.

<sup>27</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.175.

<sup>28</sup> These are held in the DMFA.

The cypress tree  
 Is crowned with snow  
 Shrouded in white  
 The graves lie low,

Soft thy kisses  
 Warm thy breath  
 Vision of Love -  
*Angel of Death!*<sup>29</sup>

An important theme for De Morgan, the subject of this painting is re-visited in at least three versions of the same title painted by De Morgan from 1880 onwards, as well as being exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery (1881). In the painted versions, such as *The Angel of Death* (I), 1880 [Ill.4], De Morgan incorporates both traditional Christian iconography, such as angels' wings and the red robes of the martyr worn by the young girl who is approached by the angel of death, yet the spiritualist preoccupations with the passage of the soul and its resurrection through personal spiritual development are also evident here, in details such as the parallelling of the two female figures to suggest that they are two parts of only one figure, but one who simultaneously represents youth and age, and spiritual development. The young girl and the older woman are almost identical, except for the ageing of the angel's features. The two figures could be seen to represent the evolving soul, from youthful idealism to the esoteric knowledge of the angel after death. The pose of interconnected arms and hands is echoed by the intensity and intimacy of the shared gaze, suggested a consolidation or union of the two figures, and in doing so, producing a metaphor for the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Anti-materialist messages also proliferate, for example, in a play written in 1870 called *Love of Money is the Root of all Evil*, and as a persistent theme in poems and tales of disagreement and crime over material gain. These anticipate other important themes which De Morgan returned to and developed in her painting. In works such as *Earthbound* (1897) [Ill.5], *A Soul in Hell* (n.d.) [Ill.6], and *The Worship of Mammon*

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.171.



(1909) [Ill.7], De Morgan shows the crippling impact that materialism has on the spirit. She achieves this by showing an individual (usually one of the rare appearances of a central male character) who is materially surrounded by wealth, yet remains unhappy and whose spiritual development is stunted. These anti-materialist concepts are, I suggest, always underpinned by supernatural and spiritualist components, whether through the depiction of phantasmagorical creatures and experiences, or through an exploration of death and assorted ghosts, spectres and angels.

The collection of poems written by De Morgan in the period 1868-70 all have common themes of death, supernatural and the sublime forces of nature. Often imagery of sea and wild torrents of water in storms dominate narratives of revenge and murder; again these conceptions are repeatedly made manifest in her later allegorical paintings, such as *The Storm Spirits* (1900) [Ill.8], and are often relevant to them. The gloomy, untamed landscape appears to be a direct transposition of the Yorkshire moors, perhaps through an empathy with the Brontës' writing, but also directly experienced by Evelyn as a child through regular visits to the family home, Cannon Hall, in Yorkshire. Another poem, written at the age of thirteen demonstrates De Morgan's growing fascination with esoteric themes and fantasy, containing images which De Morgan returns to again and again in her later paintings:

Hail land of darkness  
Drear abode of gloom  
Where fantoms [sic] dwell  
And enchantments bloom

Dred [sic] land of magic  
Of fiends the home  
Where goblins dance  
And spirits roam

Where spectres grim  
Do play their part

And sorcerers try

Their magic art

Hail! Hail! Hail! Hail!

Thou mighty land

Where enchantment reigns

Like [? word unclear] an unearthly band<sup>30</sup>

This evocation of enchanted lands is developed through De Morgan's later spiritualist beliefs, where images of spectres and sorcerers are re-worked into a schematic evolutionary hierarchy of magic-makers, martyrs and other mystical and occult figures. De Morgan's early tendency towards the dramatic is tempered in her adult art, yet the mature works show a debt to the imaginative and esoteric world invoked in De Morgan's early writings. The interest in mysticism and the supernatural become subsumed into the alternative creeds of spiritualism and its practices.

Evelyn continued to paint, and in 1871 her father notes in his diary that he employed a Mr Green, Drawing Master.<sup>31</sup> In that same year, Jane Hales, the sixteen year-old young woman who was nursemaid to Evelyn's sister Wilhelmina, returned to the Pickering home.<sup>32</sup> Jane Hales was to become of iconic significance in De Morgan's art. For the first time De Morgan had access to a willing sitter for her artistic studies. This was to prove an important event in the artistic career of De Morgan: having the 'pretty'<sup>33</sup> and

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<sup>30</sup> Evelyn De Morgan, Exercise book of poems, December 1868, p.1. DMFA.

<sup>31</sup> Percy Pickering, *Diary*, 28 April, 1871, DMFA.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, At the end of the diary, Percy Pickering makes references to domestic staff: "Jane Hales £11 a year. Came 13 November 1866 left through illness". Later, however, Jane returned to work for the family: 1 November, 1871. [Jane Hales] "came again into my service. Wages £16 a year all found".

<sup>33</sup> Stirling, who had Jane Hales to live with her as a lifelong companion, refers to her throughout *William De Morgan and his Wife* as "pretty Jane". The De Morgan Foundation has a collection of unpublished photographs and memorabilia relating to Hales. She was buried as part of the family, next to William and Evelyn at Brookwood Cemetery.

apparently good-natured Jane Hales as a close companion meant that Evelyn had her own 'captive' model, with whom she could practise her life-drawing techniques. Significantly, as will be seen in the succeeding chapters, Jane Hales was to stand out in De Morgan's work as an endlessly re-worked female prototype. She represented the robust, athletic female form which dominates De Morgan's paintings, and presents a dramatic contrast to the pale, listless, ailing females which proliferate in the paintings of Edward Burne-Jones.

In the same year, Evelyn's mother suffered frequent bouts of ill-health, and as a consequence, she spent a great deal of time in the company of her father, in what appears to be a close and affectionate relationship. The unexpected death of Pickering in 1876 appears to act as a catalyst in De Morgan's career; precipitating De Morgan's plans for independent travel and study, and also marking a significant engagement with theological questions through her paintings. There are many brief entries in Pickering's diary, noting regular attendance at church with Evelyn<sup>34</sup>. The iconography of High Anglican, and later, Catholic tradition, are used by De Morgan to underpin a more personal religious symbolism, which is evident in much of De Morgan's work dating from the 1880s. Pickering also took Evelyn, Spencer and Rowland to the Yorkshire Dales, where she continued to sketch and paint the dramatic landscape which inspired her. In a diary entry, 1871, he notes that on 7 September "after breakfast went to Dale with E[velyn], S[pencer], R[owland]: for E[velyn] to paint". Later, on October, Pickering records "Went to Torquay with E[velyn]. -Long walks, just E[velyn] and Pickering, every day." De Morgan's close and affectionate relationship with her father and response to his death in 1876 provides a catalyst for her spiritualist practises in the early 1880s.

With the approval, even if somewhat limited, of her family, Evelyn began to paint in earnest from the age of sixteen onwards. The surviving diaries of Evelyn Pickering, 1872, aged sixteen to seventeen, reveal her serious commitment to art both as a legitimate career, and, perhaps most importantly, as a meaningful repository of cultural concepts and exploration. On her seventeenth birthday, she writes:

At work a little after 7, after breakfast worked again till 12 when we

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<sup>34</sup> P. Pickering, *Diary* 1871. Sunday 22 January, Sunday 12 February, for example.

walked to Snowdon, it rained hard and was very dismal. 17 today. That is to say 17 years wasted; three parts at least wasted in eating, dawdling and flittering time away. I dread getting older, at the beginning of each year I say 'I *will* do something' and at the end I have done nothing. Art is eternal, but life is short, and each minute spent idly will rise, swelled to whole months and years, and hound me in my grave. This year every imaginable obstacle has been put in my way, but slowly and tediously I am mastering them all. Now I *must* do something. I will work until I do something.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, De Morgan's declaration that "art is eternal" is paralleled in her later spiritualist writings, where, for example, an angel observes that despite new scientific discoveries, "the only hope will be in Art and Beauty".<sup>36</sup>

The sense of time slipping away, and ambitious expectations of herself, and the importance of art echoes throughout De Morgan's work, in themes of mortality, spirituality, and the eternal nature of art and soul. De Morgan's spiritualist beliefs, that earthly life is only a beginning of the long progression of the soul is illustrated in *The Hourglass* (1904-5) [Ill.9]. The message that worldly life is merely a phase, and that death is not the end, but an important state of transformation, is forcefully made in this painting by the use of Janey Morris, the archetypal Pre-Raphaelite stunner. Janey Morris appears here as an ageing, discontented woman, who is unaware of the resurrection which awaits her, symbolised by an group of angels in the background. In subverting the dominant image of Janey Morris as a young, beautiful woman, made famous by Rossetti's obsessive representations, De Morgan challenges both the viewer's expectations of the aesthetic purpose of such female imagery, replacing beauty with age, and forces the viewer to focus on the allegorical content of such an image in order interpret the profound spiritual message which De Morgan expresses in this work.

De Morgan's diary charts not only her desire to become an artist, but also the

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<sup>35</sup> E. Pickering, *Diary* 1871-2, Friday, 30 August, 1872, DMFA.

<sup>36</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.77.

subjects which inspired her. On a trip to Weymouth in October 1872, De Morgan notes her interest in shells on the beach.<sup>37</sup> The Victorian fascination with shells, rocks, fossils and geology centred particularly upon beaches with limestone cliffs, which became the subject of other Pre-Raphaelite artists such as William Dyce, with *Pegwell Bay* (1858-60) [Ill.10]. The principles of modern geology had been established by Charles Lyell, whose three volumes of books *Principles of Geology*, 1830-33, informed Darwin's theory of evolution. Lyell's work on stratigraphy, the study of the layers of the earth's surface, classified strata by examining fossils in ancient marine beds in western Europe. Although initially sceptical of Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolutionary progression, Lyell later became a strong supporter, and his research on geology became a central tool in the evolutionary hypothesis.

De Morgan's interest in shells, rocks and beaches informs almost all of her adult paintings to some extent, where, as I will show, they become endowed with spiritualist symbolism signifying a particularly female aesthetic of regeneration and resurrection. The involvement with spiritualism, and the encounter between religious belief and scientific theories of evolution was to have profound impact on the mature works of De Morgan, although these central aspects of De Morgan's work have received little scholarly attention.

De Morgan's surviving diary ends with the last day at Kensington, yet it was her years at the Slade in which De Morgan's style and influences were fundamentally established. Access to proper life classes, and the chance to establish relationships with other committed women students, enabled De Morgan to realise her ambition to paint as a professional career. Moreover, paintings which had been conceived and started during her student training were subsequently exhibited at the Dudley Gallery, with *St. Catherine of Alexandria*, 1876 [Ill.11], when she was still enrolled at the Slade, and *Cadmus and Harmonia* and *Ariadne in Naxos*, in 1877. De Morgan's Slade School training under the leadership of Edward Poynter, was pivotal in the development of her style, yet even within the relative confines of the classical legacy of Poynter, De Morgan's work showed early indications of her interest in theology, through an affiliation between the female form as allegory and the nature of the divine.

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<sup>37</sup> E. Pickering, *Diary*, 1871-2, Tuesday, 2 October, 1872, DMFA.

### 1.3 Art Schools and Training: Overcoming Prejudice

In October, 1872, at the age of seventeen, De Morgan enrolled at the South Kensington National Art Training School. One of the new government schools of training, South Kensington offered opportunities for women artists to train alongside their male counterparts. It was essential for women artists to receive a proper training, particularly through access to the Life Class, in order to compete at a professional level. Dodd points out that:

One of the main objections of many art critics when reviewing women artists in the 1860s was their lack of anatomical knowledge which precluded even an attempt at figure drawing. It was frequently pointed out that the subject matter of women was severely limited because of the barriers imposed by their lack of opportunity to study from the life (either from draped or undraped models).<sup>38</sup>

De Morgan spent only a short time at Kensington, before joining the Slade School of Art in the following January, as on 20 December, 1872, Evelyn notes in her diary that it is “my last day at Kensington”. Such a rapidly changing and inconsistent approach to art training was not unusual for women artists as Cherry shows:

More significant were the differences in the duration of men and women’s art education. In contrast to the continuity of art education experienced by young men graduating from paternal guidance to formal training, a process which facilitated a smooth transition to professional practice, women’s art training was often fragmentary, patched together by attending

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<sup>38</sup> S. Dodd, “Art Education for Women in the 1860s, a Decade of Debate” in C. Campbell Orr (ed.), *Women in the Victorian Art World*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995, p.188.

several classes, or by switching schools in search of better instruction.<sup>39</sup>

The Kensington art college based its teaching on pedantic copying of still-life objects, and was not viewed by all its students as a successful training ground. Augustus Spencer, later to become the Principal when the Kensington National School became upgraded and radically altered as the Royal College of Art, made a damning indictment of its teaching practices when he was a student:

South Kensington teaching is slow, vicious, feeble and antiquated. What takes place ... is that students are set to copy an apple or a sphere, or a cone, on which they spend a year, a second year is spent on copying a bad torso and thus the student reaches 30 and knows nothing.<sup>40</sup>

The combination of being a female student, who may well have found the facilities and instruction alienating, and the dogmatic approach to drawing, may both be partly responsible for the decision to leave the college after less than one term. Despite apparent dissatisfaction at Kensington, during her attendance there, De Morgan's diary discloses numerous visits to the British Museum, where she went in order to study musculature,<sup>41</sup> the Dudley Gallery, where she was later to exhibit her first public painting, *Catherine of Alexandria*, in 1876, and the National Gallery. The results of these can be seen in the numerous student sketches and studies by De Morgan, which build the draperies and expression onto the anatomical frame. This technique was used by almost all professional artists of the period.

In 1871, the Slade School of Art was opened in Gower Street, London. Edward Poynter (1836-1919), a friend of William De Morgan, was appointed the first Professor.

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<sup>39</sup> D. Cherry, *Painting Women*, p.54.

<sup>40</sup> Augustus Spencer, 'Royal Commission on Technical Education, 1884, in Frayling, C. *The Royal College of Art: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Art and Design*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1987, p.96.

<sup>41</sup> Evelyn Pickering, *Diary*, Saturday, 14 September, 1872. "[went to] British Museum to study muscles for man throwing", DMFA.

It was an independent school, and although it had much in common with the Royal Academy, where most of the first-generation Pre-Raphaelites trained, it also had a different criteria and set of values, promoting the equal training of women.

In January, 1872, Evelyn enrolled at the Slade School. In that same year, her Uncle, Roddam Spencer-Stanhope purchased Villa Nuti, in Bellosquardo, in Florence. This would enable Evelyn to enjoy many visits to the ancient city, where the study of the Renaissance works, and in particular those of Botticelli and da Vinci, were to have a profound effect on her style and use of allegory in art.

The Slade School of Art, was, like Kensington, a new institution, set up as an alternative training ground to the Royal Academy. Charlotte Weeks, art critic for *The Magazine of Art*, wrote that for the first time in England “a public Fine Art School was thrown open to male and female students on precisely the same terms, and giving to both sexes fair and equal opportunities.”<sup>42</sup> Despite this egalitarian claim, students would have to pay fees for their education, or compete for limited scholarship places. To gain a place at the Slade, for example, a candidate had to be extremely well-educated as well as possess talent in drawing and painting. The Slade offered six three-year scholarships of £50 to men and women, and, in the early years, women outnumbered men. De Morgan was awarded a scholarship, which had strict conditions attached:

The competitors cannot be over 19 at the time of the award; they are required to have passed a preliminary examination in ancient and modern history, geography, and mathematics, or one modern foreign language and English ...[resulting from this] five Slade scholarships and twenty-two prizes have been carried off by female students.<sup>43</sup>

Whilst De Morgan's unusually thorough education and industry made her an obvious candidate for the scholarship, the very high standard of education meant that in reality, these scholarships were not meant for, or accessible to, working-class women. It

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<sup>42</sup> C. Weeks, “Women at Work: the Slade Girls”, in *Magazine of Art*, August, 1883, p.325.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.328.



is also interesting to note that the equality of the status of the sexes did not always go as planned, as “by the 1890s, the behaviour of male art students, particularly those at the Slade School of Art, was increasing bohemian and antisocial.”<sup>44</sup> However, it was certainly an advancement for the crusade of women artists. In Poynter’s opening address at the Slade, 2 October, 1871, he makes specific reference to the case of women’s art education:

There is unfortunately a difficulty which has always stood in the way of female students acquiring that thorough knowledge of the figure which is essential to the production of work of a high class; and that is, of course, that they are debarred from the same complete study of the model that is open to the male students, and for want of which no amount of study of the antique, of books, or of anatomy, will compensate; for, as I have said before, nothing but constant practice from the model itself will suffice.<sup>45</sup>

In the acknowledgement of these barriers, Poynter’s liberal policy represented a radical change in the way women artists were perceived. In the same address, Poynter also discusses the focal value of figurative study, and its lack in other institutions, in a policy which is in keeping with De Morgan’s own concerns:

Except at the Royal Academy there is no school of any importance in London for the study of high art. In the various branches of the Government Schools, the primary object is confessedly the study of ornamental design, as applied to the industrial arts, and attention is only paid to high art in so far as the study of the figure is necessary for some particular branch of ornamental manufacture.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> H. Taylor, “If a young painter be not fierce and arrogant...” in *Art History*, 9 (2), June, 1986, pp.232-242.

<sup>45</sup> E. Poynter, Address delivered at the opening of the Slade School of Fine Art in University College, London, October 2, 1871, in Poynter, E., *Ten Lectures on Art*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1879, pp.97-99.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.95-96.

These sentiments, which were pivotal in giving women access, for the first time, to proper artistic training, were not met with support by all. One commentator, who writes anonymously as a member of the Royal Academy, is scathing in his dismissal of women artists, in an article published in the *Magazine of Art*, 1888:

[Women artists demonstrate] a high degree of patient imitateness - a simple and touching devotion to stipple and shadow - rather than true artistic power and breadth of any kind. In this sort of work, indeed - that of patient, dexterous manipulation - women may always be depended upon to assert her power of *execution*; but it is in *invention* and *originality*, or the realisation of them, that the failure of the sex in art becomes apparent. [...] Not one female name can be found worthy to be placed on a level even with the masters of the second rank.<sup>47</sup>

Against this background of such uniform and strongly-voiced opposition to the admittance of women to art schools, the views and policies implemented by Edward Poynter should not be underestimated in the significant contribution he made to women's rights in general and real opportunities for the first time, for women artists in particular. Edward Poynter, like his friend and contemporary Sir Frederic Leighton, was educated on the continent, an education which was to shape the teaching policies of the Slade, pointing out that "there can be no question of the great advantage the French, and other foreign artists, have over us in the knowledge of all the technical and practical details of their profession".<sup>48</sup> Poynter's favourite artists were the Italian Renaissance painters, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, rather than the modern movements of Impressionism and painting 'en plein air'. Perhaps Poynter's most successful and well-known work is *Faithful Unto Death* (1865), a sentimental depiction of a young Roman soldier, remaining steadfastly at his sentry post in the eruption of Vesuvius, Pompeii. This received critical acclaim from the Royal Academy, and in 1867, *Israel in Egypt* became the prototype of

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<sup>47</sup> [Anon.] Member of R.A., "Woman and her chance as Artist" in *Magazine of Art*, April, 1888, p.xxv.

<sup>48</sup> E. Poynter, *Ten Lectures on Art*, p.100.

the popular genre of classicised and often melodramatic pseudo-historical subjects. De Morgan's early works reflect this influence, with subjects ranging from Renaissance-inspired works such as *The Annunciation*, 1879, to mythological scenes, in paintings such as *Ariadne in Naxos*, 1877. However, in the following chapters, I will maintain that these early works form part of a development in De Morgan's art from the use of existing subject repertoire towards the a style and presentation of themes and subjects which specifically address dominant cultural questions of faith from a female perspective.

Poynter occupied the position of Slade Professor from 1871 until 1875, where his policies led to the teaching of high quality execution and technique, prioritising what he constantly refers to in his *Ten Lectures on Art* as 'high art.' In De Morgan's work the legacy of Poynter's teaching can be best understood in her detailed preparatory sketches, of anatomy, drapery, and also in the impetus of classical allegory in her early works. Many of De Morgan's works draw upon the Slade's bias towards classicism, however, whilst acknowledging this influence in De Morgan's work, I propose that De Morgan uses the established artistic conventions and iconography seen in works by Poynter, Leighton and Alma Tadema, and instead endows them with allegorical and rejuvenated potential meanings. In these early paintings such as *Night and Sleep* (1878) [Ill. 12], and *Cadmus and Harmonia* (1877), De Morgan introduces themes which later dominate her work: death, rebirth and the metamorphosis of the body. In *Night and Sleep*, for example, a male and female figure hover in the air, entwined together as they distribute poppies to the rocky landscape below. The languorous posture of the entangled bodies, and the pale, hollow eyes, are all suggestive of narcosis; a reading supported by the strewn poppies and the title itself. Narcosis and trance-states have close links with mysticism and visions, and the theme of death as a state of transition recurs not only in De Morgan's works, but obliquely in the *Briar Rose*, or *Sleeping Beauty* (1870-1889) paintings by Burne-Jones. *Cadmus and Harmonia*, a subject taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, shows the beautiful young wife of Cadmus with her husband, newly transformed into a serpent's body, "embracing and twining himself about the neck he knew so well [...] his wife stroked the glistening neck of the crested snake, and suddenly there were two of them, gliding along with their coils intertwined".<sup>49</sup> The choice of this subject is a striking one, and De

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<sup>49</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. M. Innes, London: Penguin, 1955, p.110.

Morgan's represents the centrality of the female form, rather than of Cadmus, as subject to the forces and processes of transformation. Again, these early works reveal the particular areas of interest which De Morgan later took up through spiritualism; the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, and the processes and layers of transitional progress from one form to the next. In these early paintings, De Morgan appears to conflate states such as narcosis, sleep and death, and the body, in change and continuity. In the following chapter I will demonstrate how, in her later works, from the mid-1880s onwards, these themes are expressed through a syncretic approach; drawing on both the existing vocabulary of artistic symbolism and subject-matter, and underpinning these with a Darwinian paradigm of change and development.

De Morgan was a talented and very successful student, achieving high standards in all the subjects she studied.<sup>50</sup> She won several prestigious prizes, including awards for Painting from the Antique, Drawing from the Antique, Life Drawing and Composition Studies. At the age of eighteen, she also won a three year scholarship (outlined above) at the Slade, worth £50 per year. Stirling relates an incident when, having entered some of her work in a competition at the Slade, her name 'Evelyn Pickering' was put up on the lists. A group of male students were reading it as she passed, and she overheard them saying angrily "do you know this damned fellow, this Evelyn Pickering? Who is he?"<sup>51</sup> Even at this progressive institution of art, it simply did not occur to these young men that an award-winning artist named 'Evelyn' could be anything other than a male.

Gender prejudice informs much of De Morgan's struggle to be recognised as a talented artist, and as such, I suggest provides an impetus for De Morgan's feminist agenda in her works. Burne-Jones, a close friend of William De Morgan and Roddam Spencer Stanhope,<sup>52</sup> is the artist with whom Evelyn De Morgan is most frequently

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<sup>50</sup> Subjects taken by De Morgan at the Slade were: 1872-73; Fine Art, Fine Art Anatomy, Fine Art Archaeology. 1873-74; Fine Art, Fine Art Anatomy. 1875-74; Fine Art. 1875-76; Fine Art, Fine Art Anatomy. I am grateful to the archivist at the Slade Gallery for locating these unpublished records.

<sup>51</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.180.

<sup>52</sup> Both William De Morgan and John Roddam Spencer Stanhope feature regularly in Georgiana Burne-Jones's *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols., London: Macmillan, 1904.

compared, yet, despite a close relationship with William, he was typical of many of his male contemporaries in that he was unable or unwilling to accept that women artists could be as gifted as a male. He admitted to finding women intimidating, and when asked his opinion of woman artists, he declared "there aren't any".<sup>53</sup> Burne-Jones, whose paintings are dominated by images of beautiful enchanting *femmes-fatales*, was unable to reconcile these fantasy images of women with the real version. De Morgan, on the other hand, avoids overt eroticism in her female figures, focussing instead on narratives or allegories of inner spiritual resources, in which the material body functions only as a temporary housing of the much more important soul. Despite Burne-Jones's almost obsessive fascination with beautiful women and images of chivalry and romance, when he was asked to sign a petition in support of the early suffrage movement, his response is revealing:

Oh how cross Mr Jones was at being disturbed! For he opened the door himself, and glared with his mild blue eyes at the German nurse who proffered the petition. He would sit at ladies' feet, kiss their pale hands, but not those of women who voted, so he told her.<sup>54</sup>

This view of Burne-Jones is borne out in comments made in his letters to Helen Gaskell, where he remarks "Yet, I would sooner look at a beautiful woman who could do nothing than on the most highly gifted woman in the world who was plain".<sup>55</sup> It is not therefore surprising then, that he found Evelyn De Morgan, with her ambitious determination to succeed in a male-dominated arena, an intimidating woman, remarking in a letter "[she

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<sup>53</sup> E. Burne-Jones, in M. Lago (ed.), *Burne-Jones Talking. Conversations 1895-1898, preserved by his studio assistant, Thomas Rooke*, London and New York: John Murray, 1982, p.136.

<sup>54</sup> V. Hunt, *The Flurried Years*, London: Hurts and Blackett, 1926, p.14.

<sup>55</sup> E. Burne-Jones, May/June 1894, letter to H.M. Gaskell, special collections, British Library, Add MSS 54217 F175-357.

is] a plain lady, whom I never look at when I talk to her".<sup>56</sup> Evelyn De Morgan and Edward Burne-Jones shared common interests in spiritualism<sup>57</sup>, as well as Pre-Raphaelite art, yet despite these superficial similarities, Burne-Jones continued to be hostile towards Evelyn De Morgan. His critical comments on her personality were consolidated by attacks on her paintings:

I went to see a lady's pictures yesterday. They were wonderfully painted and only extreme talent could have enabled her even to put them together as they are [but] if this girl had left figure painting alone and had gone about the world modestly and happily doing pretty views, cities, flowers, and every beautiful thing she came across in nature, with a cheerful mind, and if she'd rigidly left all figures out, she would have done admirable and useful work that would have been a pleasure to everybody. But these pictures are only a bore and an anomaly.<sup>58</sup>

Yet in direct opposition to this view of De Morgan's work articulated by Burne-Jones, G.F. Watts, friend and mentor of Roddam Spencer-Stanhope, announced of De Morgan "she is a long way ahead of all the women [...] and considerably ahead of most of the men. I look upon her as the first woman-artist of the day - if not of all time".<sup>59</sup> Like many other critics of the period, Burne-Jones expresses the view that women artists should remain within the accepted genres of flower painting, or domestic scenes. Those women artists

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<sup>56</sup> E. Burne-Jones, quoted in P. Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, Stroud: Sutton, 1997, p.203.

<sup>57</sup> Instances of Burne-Jones's interest in spiritualism are documented in *The Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, vol. I, G. Burne-Jones, London: Macmillan, 1904. See pp.92-94 for examples.

<sup>58</sup> Although not explicitly stated in this passage, I have identified the painting referred to as De Morgan's *Life and Thought have gone away* (1893), through a detailed analysis of the iconography Burne-Jones goes on to criticise in this passage, including his censorious castigation of the figure of the knight whom he describes as a "knock-kneed impotent creature". E. Burne-Jones, *Burne-Jones Talking. His Conversations 1895-1898 preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, M. Lago (ed.), pp.148-150.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.193.

who were successfully executing figure paintings, were gaining commissions and exhibiting in major exhibitions, despite the prevailing views of some of the more influential artists and critics of the period. In the context of these dismissive and critical opinions, coming from even close friends such as Burne-Jones, De Morgan's works can be read as a consciously politicised response to such entrenched beliefs. The foregrounding of women as principle subject in her works, combined with the original presentations of traditional treatments of well-known subjects, such as figures from classical mythology and biblical narrative, demonstrate De Morgan's determined commitment to contest these confining views of women in the late nineteenth century.

De Morgan's preoccupation with the female form and physical and mental confinement is resolved through the alternative freedom offered by spiritual enlightenment. *The Soul's Prison House* (1888) [Ill. 13] illustrates the direct impact that De Morgan's early experiments with spiritualism has on her painting. Here, a young woman is confined in a grim prison cell, yet despite the circumstances gazes outwards with an expression of calm acceptance. This painting was accompanied by a text attributed to the mystic Saint Augustine of Hippo, expressing a principal element of De Morgan's spiritualist beliefs: "Illuminate, oh illuminate my blind soul that sitteth in darkness and the Shadow of Death". This corresponds with the advice offered by an angel in *The Result of an Experiment*: "let no cloud rest on your mind or dim your sight. Glory and light are near you. Look up and see God. Listen to the music of the spheres, and in time the full blaze of light will brighten your remaining days on earth."<sup>60</sup> The concepts of enlightenment and imprisonment are expressed in this work in the incarceration of a young woman. This theme is repeated in several of De Morgan's paintings, and draws upon the conjunction of the female as a pivotal figure through which allegories of spiritual blindness and enlightenment are explored. In my analysis of De Morgan's work and also of her life, the joint interests of feminism and spiritualism become integral and connected, interconnected through her experiences as a woman artist, and her developing beliefs in an evolutionary progression of the soul.

De Morgan's desire for independence and autonomy over her career grew more marked in her time at the Slade. She studied there between 1872 and 1875, but then took

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<sup>60</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.99.

the very unusual decision to travel alone to Italy, where she visited Rome, Perugia, and Assisi. Stirling makes particular reference to the unusual decision of De Morgan to travel alone to Italy, or to stay with Roddam Spencer Stanhope, but this image is refuted by contemporary sources, which suggest that De Morgan actually travelled regularly with groups of artist friends, often women. Violet Paget recalls a planned visit to Italy in 1886, where “tomorrow at 12.45 I meet at Dover M. Wakefield, Marion Terry and Evelyn Pickering, who goes as far as Milan with us”.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that De Morgan was part of a close-knit group of artists who regularly travelled to Italy, and Paget specifically mentions connections to Rome, Venice and Florence as the key centres of interest.

After the initial visit to Rome, De Morgan returned to the Slade to study from 1875-76, after which period she began to exhibit and sell her paintings. It is from this period, following the death of her father and her visit to Italy, that De Morgan’s interest in spiritualism began to manifest itself directly in her painting.

#### 1.4 De Morgan, Spiritualism and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle

The aftermath of Percival Pickering’s death in 1876 is recorded in Stirling’s journal account, when Stirling was eleven years old and Evelyn twenty-one. “Though she [Evelyn] wore a hat which almost hid her face, I could tell she was crying all the time”.<sup>62</sup> In the months after Pickering’s death, Stirling recalls the impact on the Evelyn in particular:

At this time Evelyn worked at home, using the middle drawing-room as her studio. [...] She was a most trying inmate, all fiery and excitement from morning till night, Mamma and I used to be positively thankful when we heard the door bang and knew she had left the house, and we might reasonably expect peace and quiet for half an hour. One never quite knew

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<sup>61</sup> [Violet Paget] V. Lee, *Vernon Lee's Letters*, I. Cooper Willis (ed.), London: Privately Printed, 1937, p. 235.

<sup>62</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, unpublished MS *Autobiography*, vol. 2, DMFA.



with her what was coming next. I used to say it was like having a perpetual thunderstorm in the house [...] Evelyn was utterly unreasonable.<sup>63</sup>

It appears that it is at this point that De Morgan begins to seriously question the Christian concept of an afterlife. Stirling's journal depicts the distraught response of Evelyn to the death of her father, shutting herself away with her painting with strict instructions not be disturbed:

If an organ stopped in front of the house as sure as possible Evelyn would issue forth onto the balcony in an old and grimy painting blouse, her hair half over her face, flourishing an easil [sic] in one hand and a pallate [sic] in another, and yell at the top of her voice for the man to go away.<sup>64</sup>

It is around this time, between the summer of 1876 and 1877, that De Morgan travelled to Florence again. As a result of this visit, De Morgan produced several works which had death and the afterlife as a central theme, including *Night and Sleep* (1878), *Deianira* (1878), and *The Annunciation* (1879). In 1880, Roddam Spencer Stanhope moved permanently live in Florence, and in the early 1880s, De Morgan moved into her own studio in Trafalgar Studios, Chelsea. In August of 1883, she met William De Morgan, and in 1887 they married. Through her relationship with William, Evelyn was introduced to the unorthodox De Morgan parents. Augustus De Morgan, with the encouragement of his wife Sophia, was an advocate for women's higher education, albeit reluctantly, as their daughter Mary De Morgan recollects:

My mother had always been strongly in sympathy with the movement for procuring for women more thorough and higher education [...] Although my father did not entirely share my mother's views on the point of the

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<sup>63</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, unpublished MS, *Autobiography*, vol. 3, DMFA.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

need for higher training and political emancipation for women, she succeeded in inducing him to give a course of lectures to the first pupils of Bedford College, and also to join the movement for procuring female suffrage.<sup>65</sup>

Augustus De Morgan was an astronomer, scientist and mathematician, whose ground-breaking theories led to his post as Professor of Mathematics, at University College, London. His seminal works on *Formal Logic* (1847), *The Differential Calculus* (1842), and *The Theory of Probabilities* (1838) provided new and challenging insights into maths and physics. He also wrote the more informal *Budget of Paradoxes* (1872), which demonstrates striking parallels with the mathematically-based word puns of Charles Dodgson, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1872). Both men were highly acclaimed scientists and logicians, fascinated with language and disorder, word play and paradoxes. Highly regarded as a scientist, in the areas of maths, philosophy, physics and astronomy, De Morgan demonstrates the alliance between science and spiritualism, attending séances held by the American medium, Mrs Hayden in 1852.<sup>66</sup> As part of his interest in alternative religious groups, De Morgan was “well informed in Eastern astronomy and mythology, and saw that much of modern doctrine had gained something from its form, at least from ancient symbolism”,<sup>67</sup> an interest which William and Evelyn De Morgan also shared and expressed through their art. Professor De Morgan argued that it was not possible to dismiss as yet unmeasurable and undiscovered forces in the universe, and that although science could explain some precepts, as yet nothing could categorically disprove psychic phenomena. In the preface to Sophia De Morgan's *From Matter to Spirit* (1863), De Morgan states his position regarding spiritualism:

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<sup>65</sup> M. De Morgan (ed.), “Preface” *Threescore Years and Ten. Reminiscences of the late S.E. De Morgan*, p.xxxvi.

<sup>66</sup> J. Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.11.

<sup>67</sup> S. De Morgan, *Memoir of Augustus De Morgan*, London: Longman and Green, 1882, p.21.

Thinking it very likely that the universe may contain a few agencies - say half a million - about which no man knows anything, I cannot but suspect that a small proportion of these agencies, - say five thousand - may be severally competent to the production of all the [unexplained] phenomena, or may be quite up to the task among them. The physical explanations which I have seen are easy, but miserably insufficient; the spiritual hypothesis is sufficient, but ponderously difficult. Time and thought will decide, the second asking the first for more results of trial.<sup>68</sup>

William De Morgan's designs for pottery which were inspired by Eastern imagery, and Evelyn De Morgan's interest in pre-Christian, Eastern religious symbolism may well have been influenced by the preoccupations of the De Morgan parents. Sophia in particular was persuaded by the arguments of Thomas Taylor, Plato scholar:

We are beginning to see that as profound a symbolism, setting forth psychical as well as religious truth, underlies the myths of gods and goddesses, and the mysteries of the Greek worship at its different periods, as has been brought to light in the mythologies of India and Egypt.<sup>69</sup>

These viewss have a direct correlation with the classical figures portrayed in Evelyn De Morgan's paintings, which through the use of specifically spiritualist symbolism, aim to illustrate "universal" religious beliefs, in direct contention with the limitation imposed by orthodox Christian tenets. Paintings which demonstrate these characteristics of Platonic philosophy and spiritualist interpretations of traditional dogma will be discussed in detail in Chapter two.

A link between feminist campaigning and spiritualism is also evident between the two generations of De Morgans. As Sophia De Morgan convinced her husband to support

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<sup>68</sup> Augustus De Morgan, "Preface", S. De Morgan, *From Matter to Spirit. The Result of Ten Years' Experience in Spirit Manifestations*, London: Longman, Green and Roberts, 1863, pp.v-vi.

<sup>69</sup> M. De Morgan (ed.), *Threescore Years and Ten*, pp.62-63.

the suffrage movement from the mid-nineteenth century, William De Morgan also showed his support of the suffrage movement, where, for example, he served as a Vice-president of the Mens's League for Women's Suffrage (1913).<sup>70</sup> As I demonstrated in the Introduction, Evelyn De Morgan herself was active in the suffrage movement in general, and in her own right as a woman artist. This also extended to De Morgan's philanthropic social reform interests, in activities such as the loan of paintings to the South London Art Gallery.

Specific female friendships appear to have had an impact on De Morgan's work. Sophia De Morgan notes that the art critic and feminist writer, Anna Jameson,<sup>71</sup> was also a practising spiritualist.<sup>72</sup> In view of the common interests shared by these women, it is not surprising then that Evelyn De Morgan should feel accord with Jameson's prolific writings on the religious iconography of Renaissance art, and in turn, transpose this iconography into her own spiritualist agenda.

Sophia De Morgan was both a medium, and a supporter of mesmerism, which formed a branch of spiritualist practice. Mesmerism was particularly associated with women healers, where it was used to diagnose and cure ailments by the transformation of energy through fluids; drawing power from inanimate substances, the healer's own powers, or in the production of clairvoyant intervals.<sup>73</sup> It was later used by Sophia De Morgan as part of her approach as a medium, outlined with examples of its effectiveness in *From Matter to Spirit*. Like mesmerism, phrenology was also considered as having a

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<sup>70</sup> *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who*, A.J.R. (ed.), London: Stanley Paul, 1913, p.51.

<sup>71</sup> There is further detailed discussion of Jameson's art writings and De Morgan's works in chapter three.

<sup>72</sup> M. De Morgan (ed.) , *Threescore Years and Ten*, Sophia De Morgan describes a meeting with Jameson where she was the subject of a scientific experiment to prove her psychic abilities. See pp.215-216.

<sup>73</sup> Stainton Moses notes the impact of mesmerism on Sophia De Morgan's spiritualist practices, "she was familiar with its developments [...] in all her many researches into the occult she was honourably distinguished". *Light*, 16 January, 1892, p.1.

scientific basis, and, in the 1840s, was a popular adjunct of spiritualism.<sup>74</sup> Sophia De Morgan “had also studied phrenology with avid interest”<sup>75</sup> in an attempt to unify science with the metaphysical, by asserting that different mental faculties were the product of designated areas of the brain.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, such was the popularity of phrenology as a pseudo-science that Sophia De Morgan was able to practise her readings on close friends, including Thomas Carlyle.<sup>77</sup> Phrenology also held important implications for women, as it was argued that it could be ‘scientifically’ shown that “women were potentially the equals of men”.<sup>78</sup> Phrenology, as part of the wider body of growing spiritualist practices in the nineteenth century, offered an unprecedented opportunity for real female empowerment and legitimate high-profile public activity. It was also novel in that it gave a career platform for women from all classes, and, for the first time, working-class women worked on an equal footing with those from the middle-classes.

Sophia De Morgan’s unorthodox spiritualist views correspond closely to those expressed by Evelyn and William De Morgan in *The Result of an Experiment*, and in turn, these views inform Evelyn De Morgan’s subject-matter and symbolism in art. Sophia De Morgan refers to the correspondence between the material existence on earth and the incorporeal existence of the soul, which can be accessed through practices such as

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<sup>74</sup> See A. McLaren, “Phrenology: Medium and Message” in *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 46, part 1., 1974, pp.86-97.

<sup>75</sup> J. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p.221.

<sup>76</sup> Sophia De Morgan advocates phrenology where “the form and size of the brain are indications of the mental and moral character”. *From Matter to Spirit, Ten Years’ Experience in Spirit Manifestations*, S. De Morgan, London: Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863, pp.113-116. This does have some parallels with the growth of anthropology in the Victorian era. Mary Cowling argues that popular anthropological classifications are inscribed into the art of the period, including works by the artist William Powell Frith. See “The Artist as Anthropologist in mid-Victorian England. Frith’s *Derby Day*, the *Railway Station* and the new science of mankind” in *Art History*, vol. 6, No. 4, December 1983, pp.461-471.

<sup>77</sup> S. De Morgan, *Threescore Years and Ten. Reminiscences of S.E. De Morgan*, pp.237-239.

<sup>78</sup> A. Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, London: Virago Press, 1989, p.28

automatic writing: “as the window opens wider between this state and the next, the objects of the spirit-spheres will become more clearly visible [...] ‘now we see as in a glass darkly [...] but then, face to face’.”<sup>79</sup> In the automatic transcripts of *The Result of an Experiment* a spirit remarks “I see you only in spirit; no matter visible [...] in the woman [Evelyn] I see all, not as in a glass darkly, but face to face”<sup>80</sup> The use of such biblical sources is common in both women’s writings, combined with the use of such pseudo-scientific references to the perception of matter and spirit. The changing status of this between life and death becomes a focus for many of De Morgan’s paintings, including those allegories of transformation from darkness to light.

These spiritualist interpretations, particularly the metaphoric progression towards the light, have parallels with another active feminist artist of her own generation: Emily Susan Ford (1851-1930). Ford was a landscape and figure painter, who studied at the Slade from 1875. She was the vice-chairman of the Artists’ Suffrage League,<sup>81</sup> a member of the Society for Psychical Research, and also had associations with the British National Association of Spiritualists. Although De Morgan was most closely linked with the London Spiritualist Alliance group, De Morgan’s friend, Violet Paget, notes that at a meeting of the Society for Psychical Research in 1885, “I met Emily Ford there [...] and the De Morgans”<sup>82</sup>. Along with the involvement in socialist politics,<sup>83</sup> as well as spiritualism, feminism and painting, it is not surprising that Ford and De Morgan were friends. Indeed, Cherry remarks upon the similarities in both style and subject-matter of Ford and De Morgan in spiritualist-inspired paintings, arguing that “they both portrayed in their art the spiritual journey of the soul, identified as feminine”.<sup>84</sup> There are further

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<sup>79</sup> S. De Morgan, *From Matter to Spirit*, p.318.

<sup>80</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.106.

<sup>81</sup> L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women. Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1987, p.19.

<sup>82</sup> *Vernon Lee’s Letters*, I. Cooper Willis (ed.), London: privately printed, 1937, p.176.

<sup>83</sup> D. Cherry, Draft MS, “Towards an Allegorical Reading” pp.3-4, in *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, 1850-1900*, London: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>84</sup> D. Cherry, Draft MS., “Towards an Allegorical Reading” p.7.

parallels in the titles of the two women's works, with Ford painting such works as *The Soul Finding the Light* (1889). Ford gave an address to the British National Association of Spiritualists, which was reprinted in *Light* in 1881, where she asks:

What if modern spiritualism be indeed but the mere reflections of the dawn of wider life which is coming to us? The night has been long; what if its darkest hour is upon us now? [...] May not its very gloom be a sign that the night is far spent, for is it not the darkest hour which comes before the dawn?<sup>85</sup>

This passage illustrates one of the key themes explored in both Ford's and De Morgan's art; the movement of the soul from a state of spiritual blindness, towards a 'dawn' of enlightenment. De Morgan's *Aurora Triumphans* (1876) [Ill. 14] demonstrates this idea, along with several other of her works, which are discussed in Chapter Two.

Both De Morgan and Ford had a wide social circle whose ideas can be seen to influence their work. In the letters of Violet Paget, writing under the pseudonym of Vernon Lee, frequent references to Evelyn De Morgan link her with some of the most prominent figures of the nineteenth century artistic and literary circles. Contrary to the somewhat conservative way De Morgan is presented by Stirling in *William De Morgan and his Wife*, Paget presents De Morgan as a vivacious and independent woman, with a wide circle of active artistic and spiritualist women friends, such as Ford, Marie Stillman, and Mrs Russell Barrington, as well as being close friends with important intellectual, literary and artistic figures such as the Paters, the Wildes, Leighton, Watts, and Holman Hunt.<sup>86</sup> Paget notes that amongst the frequent social meetings of this group of friends, discussions would range from "fantastic, weird, curious, cigarettes, bonbons, Baudelaire".<sup>87</sup> Through such a stimulating exchange of contemporary ideas and sources, I propose that De Morgan's work not only reflects key concerns of the late nineteenth

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<sup>85</sup> E. Ford, "Religious Bearings of Spiritualism" in *Light*, 26 November, 1881, p.374.

<sup>86</sup> *Vernon Lee's Letters* (ed.), I. Cooper Willis, London: privately printed, 1937.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1884, p.144.

century, particularly through a feminist interpretation of spiritualism, but that it also serves to actually stimulate and contribute to those ideas, through her representations of spiritual progression.

In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how De Morgan combined her engagement with the important artistic and literary communities of the final decades of the nineteenth century, with her own developing spiritualist activities. Indeed, I will argue that rather than seeing De Morgan's works as conforming to a particular and limited, declining Pre-Raphaelite style, which is essentially imitative and lacking in artistic significance, the impact of spiritualism is her primary concern, utilised by De Morgan as an evolutionary model of spiritual progression. It is this which marks out her works as innovative and imaginative responses to the cultural repercussions of scientific expansion and religious crisis.



## Chapter Two

### 'Life is the shadow of Death': Evolution and the Transmigration of the Soul<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.1 From Matter to Spirit

Through De Morgan's involvement with the growing practices of spiritualism, I will demonstrate that she transposes personal conceptions of the evolution of the spirit into allegorical paintings. De Morgan's allegories are often taken from obscure and wide-ranging literary and philosophical sources, and these works provide some important insights into the principal themes of the *fin-de-siècle*, including reactions to the expansion of industry and science through anti-materialism, and an exploration of the relationship of between art and science. However, as well as drawing on a legacy of existing philosophical ideas about death and the afterlife, I will demonstrate that De Morgan's work is significant in its engagement with contemporary themes of evolutionary progression taken directly from prevailing spiritualist publications and ideas.

Darwin's evolutionary theory, which radically undermined divine creation doctrines in favour of change through natural selection, posed a very real quandary for existing religious paradigms. Whilst the Oxford Movement campaigned for a return to fundamental Catholic values to be reinstated in the Anglican church, alternative forms of religious practice, notably spiritualism, endeavoured to absorb the language of the science, to support the idea of the evolution of the spirit towards perfection. Indeed, William Stainton Moses, who worked in both the

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<sup>1</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.35. This quote is typical of the grandiose language adopted by the Angels who are purported to communicate with the De Morgans.

Society of Psychical Research and also the L.S.A., stated that spiritualism was "that platform on which alone religion and science can meet".<sup>2</sup> Stainton Moses was also a staunch supporter of Sophia De Morgan, and his regard was considered an important endorsement, as Moses was "well known as a leader of psychic research in England, and as a medium for manifestations of a very advanced kind".<sup>3</sup> Moses was an important and influential figure in the spiritualist movement of the last decades of the nineteenth century, and was a close friend of Sophia, as well as Evelyn and William De Morgan. Born in 1839, Moses had the post of English Master at University College, London, between 1871 and 1889. He regularly visited and corresponded with Tennyson, a fellow spiritualist enquirer, who, like the De Morgan's was a supporter of the L.S.A. and its publication, *Light*.<sup>4</sup> Moses's influential books, *Spirit Teachings* (1883), and *More Spirit Teachings* (1884) contain correspondences with spirits which have many parallels with both Sophia's and Evelyn De Morgan's writings.

Sophia De Morgan's *From Matter to Spirit* (1863), outlines an argument for the acceptance of the spiritual as a logical extension of the material world. To give the debate credence, scientific 'evidence' is invoked to affirm the existence of

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<sup>2</sup> J. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p.62.

<sup>3</sup> A. Waite, *The Occult Sciences: A Compendium of Transcendental Doctrine and Experiment*, London: Kegan Paul, 1891, p.257.

<sup>4</sup> The works of Tennyson contain well-documented spiritualist themes which have received recent scholarly attention, see for example J. Hood, *Divining Desire: Tennyson and the Poetics of Transcendence*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, and R. Hill (ed.) *Tennyson's Poetry: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, New York, Norton, 1999. Tennyson was an important influence on the literature and art of the period, and indeed, there are parallels between the themes and evolutionary ideas expressed by Tennyson and De Morgan's works. However, they were a generation apart, and there is no documentary evidence to suggest that De Morgan ever met, or was overtly influenced by Tennyson. Rather, Tennyson's works can be seen as a contribution to the growing body of early spiritualist ideas which developed from the 1840s onwards, rather than a specific influence on De Morgan's interpretations of late nineteenth-century spiritualism and its emphasis on scientific enquiry.

incorporeal states of being. Sophia De Morgan quotes from William Howitt's *History of the Supernatural* (1860) to support her view that spiritualist practices have a basis in scientific empiricism:

Light, electricity , magnetism, galvanic matter, and ether, appear to be all one and the same body under different modifications. This light or ether is the element which connects soul and body, and the spiritual and material world together.<sup>5</sup>

'Light' and 'ether' are two fundamental concepts of the spirit world which Evelyn De Morgan explores in her art, and they emerge as recurring motifs in her work. Many of the Swedenborgian elements of Sophia De Morgan's book later pervade Evelyn De Morgan's art, and it is clear that the two women, although from different generations, both shared a common interest, and belief in psychic phenomena, spirit communication, and the eternal nature of the soul. Both express the transformation from death to afterlife in the form of a progression. Sophia De Morgan describes death thus:

We may naturally expect an uninterrupted rising scale in the order of creation. But that which is in the next degree above cannot be observed, as that below ourselves, by the means of our senses. We have to rise from things which are seen to those which are unseen; and in gaining a glimpse of the *something* beyond the apparent life of man.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> S. De Morgan, *From Matter to Spirit: Ten Years' Experience in Spirit Manifestations*, London: Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863, p.xli.

<sup>6</sup> S. De Morgan, *From Matter to Spirit*, p.121.

This 'rising scale' from death to the afterlife is echoed in Evelyn De Morgan's *The Result of an Experiment*, where the same idea is affirmed: "Sorrow is only of Earth; the life of the Spirit is Joy<sup>7</sup> [...], Life is everlasting; and Death but the casting of a shell. Be brave, and light will come. Look up and see God!"<sup>8</sup> Indeed this concept of death as a new threshold in spiritual progression towards a state of perfection is central to De Morgan's spiritualist beliefs, and the automatic correspondence taken seriously as scientific investigation.

Amongst Stirling's documents, she notes that Evelyn had been left "a crystal (egg-shaped) with old velvet cover which belonged to Mrs Sophia De Morgan [...] which she used for crystal gazing".<sup>9</sup> The crystal, used for clairvoyancy, and long associated with witches and sorcerers, was an important tool for spiritualist mediums. Sophia De Morgan argues that, like automatic writing, crystal gazing has a basis in scientific fact:

Crystal vision is a well-attested fact, having its laws and conditions like other phenomena in this world of known and hidden causes. [...] A spirit [brings about a vision by] directing on the crystal a stream of influence, the rays of which seemed to be refracted, and then to converge again on the side of the glass sphere before they met the eye of the seer.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Evelyn De Morgan incorporated this statement from *The Result of an Experiment*, p.24, into the design for William De Morgan's tomb at Brookwood cemetery.

<sup>8</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.24.

<sup>9</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, notebook: *Pictures, etc, already purchased in detail* (n.d.), DMFA.

<sup>10</sup> S. De Morgan, *From Matter to Spirit*, pp.109-110.

Sophia De Morgan also contemplated the spiritual nature of the symbolic in art, and it is likely that she and Evelyn would have discussed this. Demonstrating Sophia De Morgan's interest in art and esoteric symbolism, Stirling recounts an incident when Sophia De Morgan visited Burne-Jones, and praised him for the painting's "depth of meaning - its profound symbolism!".<sup>11</sup> The symbolism in Pre-Raphaelite art provided a discussion point for spiritualists debating its importance in *Light*, in articles such as "Spirit in Art", 1889, which argues in favour of Pre-Raphaelite mysticism, declaring that "science, as generally understood, is cognisant of, and evident in materiality, while art should be the vehicle through which spirit speaks to man".<sup>12</sup>

As with the pseudo-scientific branches of phrenology and mesmerism discussed in Chapter One, spiritualism contained popular supernatural tenets seen as comparable with many current scientific concerns, but primarily with investigating the facility to communicate with the dead. It was supported by a variety of professional middle-class people, including James Frazer, whose influential study of myth and world religious archetypes, *The Golden Bough* was published to popular acclaim in 1890. Other writers exploring these themes include the philosophical writer John Addington Symonds.<sup>13</sup> Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, the president of the London Spiritualist Alliance, was perhaps the most well-known advocate of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, and, like De Morgan, attempted to fuse the idea of the incorporeal spirit and rational scientific research, in his celebrated fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes. The novel which most clearly unites these seemingly disparate objectives is the last of the detective's adventures,

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<sup>11</sup> Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife*, p.72.

<sup>12</sup> [Anon], "Spirit in Art", in *Light*, 7 December, 1889, p.586.

<sup>13</sup> See J.A. Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1890.

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) where scientific rationality proves that the terrifying legend of the supernatural hell-hound is in fact, a myth. Conan-Doyle however, was an ardent supporter of spiritualism, and promoted the scientific research into spiritualist phenomena through the London Spiritualist Alliance, he also wrote several volumes on the development of spiritualism. Janet Oppenheim argues that the impetus behind spiritualism:

Came from the men and women who searched for some incontrovertible reassurance of fundamental cosmic order and purpose, especially reassurance that life on earth was not the totality of human existence.<sup>14</sup>

In this chapter, I will show that De Morgan draws upon key spiritualist ideas of the transmigration of the soul through evolutionary progression in several of her paintings. However, the pervasive Darwinian paradigm was also invoked by spiritualists to describe the evolving, organic nature of society itself as a whole. In a message directed to Evelyn, an angel states:

You are in a high state of civilisation and your eyes must look forward, not backward [...] Now you have Science and Music, Philosophy and Art of a growing sort, and a great striving for social growth, and underlying all a dim perception of another world. Never was there a greater age in the history of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Scientific empiricism, especially its singular focus on observable cause and effect, and 'concrete' evidence, was to become the cornerstone of any serious

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<sup>14</sup> J. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p.2

<sup>15</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, pp.47-48.

investigation, and was, ultimately, incorporated into the investigations carried out by spiritualist groups such as the Society for Psychical Research, in an attempt to legitimise its metaphysical aims within the domain of scientific research. In *Light*, which was supported by the De Morgans, and by Sophia De Morgan, a great deal of space is given to discussions of the impact and incorporation of spiritualism into scientific theories of existence. In 1883, for example, an address on the subject of immortality by the Rev. H. Hawes sums up the spiritualist dilemma, which De Morgan's work confronts:

So, in the light of science itself faith will become the very "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," while we look not to the things which are seen only, but to the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, will decay and fall into the grave and become disintegrated: but the things which are not seen, capable of taking on for ever and for evermore the invisible as well as those visible particles of matter, - are eternal.<sup>16</sup>

In the late-nineteenth century, tenets as diverse as metaphysical regeneration and scientific empiricism co-existed through spiritualist doctrine underpinned by pseudo-empirical research. Maas remarks that "the advent of spiritualism, together with the discovery of subject-matter in legend and literature, acted as a peculiar stimulus to Victorian painting",<sup>17</sup> and it would seem that spiritualism inspired the flourishing genre of fairy painting and to an extent, the quasi-religious Pre-Raphaelite paintings, such as Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* (c.1864-70) as Rossetti also

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<sup>16</sup> Rev. H. Hawes, "The Immortality of the Soul" in *Light*, 30 June, 1883, pp.300 - 303.

<sup>17</sup> J. Maas, *Victorian Painters*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1969, p.148.

took part in séances.<sup>18</sup> Jan Marsh notes that after Lizzie Siddal's death, Rossetti "saw Lizzie every night upon the bed as she died".<sup>19</sup> Other key figures in the Pre-Raphaelite art movement became interested in scientific enquiry into psychic phenomena, including De Morgan's close friend G.F. Watts, and John Ruskin, who became honorary members of the Institute for Psychical Research, in 1884 and 1887 respectively.

De Morgan's paintings are a synthesis of eclectic sources, influenced by an anti-materialist philosophy, in which the incorporeality of the spirit is embodied in and depicted by her use of a variety of established artistic motifs, such as Renaissance angels, heavenly auras, and symbolic use of colour. Underpinning these works are the transcripts of conversations with angels and recently deceased spirits, which form a book of writings published anonymously by Evelyn and her husband, William. *The Result of an Experiment* (1909), is described in the preface as "the outcome of a prolonged experiment tried by two persons, a lady and her husband, who were anxious to prosecute inquiries into the phenomena of so-called Spiritualism".<sup>20</sup> In an address to the L.S.A. in 1886, when Evelyn and William were beginning their automatic writing experiments, Sophia De Morgan explains how a spirit communicates automatic writing through a receptive medium:

The writing and drawing were accomplished by the substitution of a power emanating from the Spirit for that force in the human body by which the different muscles are made to do their work in obedience to the will. This power, nerve-force, or whatever we like to call that whose nature defies analysis, is projected by the sender

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148.

<sup>19</sup> J. Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Painter and Poet*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999, p.302.

<sup>20</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.xi.



through the organisation of the Medium. [...] The Spirit's thoughts or feelings regulat[es] the Medium's action, so they are in fact as one.<sup>21</sup>

Evelyn and William were evidently influenced by Sophia De Morgan's lifelong interest in spiritualism, as well as through their attendance at meetings of the L.S.A., and Society for Psychical Research. Evelyn De Morgan outlines the process for their experiment:

One person holds a pencil as though writing, and the second places his or her hand on the wrist of the writing-hand of the first. The point of the pencil of course rests on a blank sheet of paper. Under these circumstances the hands usually move after a while; each operator believing in most cases that his or her hand is pulled by the other. If the experiment is persevered in, writing not infrequently results.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of exercise was an important part of what was considered legitimate scientific research into the veracity of spiritualism. Automatic drawing or painting was equally accepted as a communication between a medium and spirits, practised by Tissot,<sup>23</sup> however, there is no direct evidence to suggest that Evelyn De Morgan attempted this in her painting, although it is very likely. It is important to establish the pivotal significance that De Morgan's belief in herself as a medium has on her art. For a medium, spiritualism was not viewed as a part-time interest, but as an

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<sup>21</sup> S. De Morgan, "Some thoughts on Mediumship", in *Light*, 13 March, 1886, p.127.

<sup>22</sup> E. De Morgan, "Preface", *The Result of an Experiment*, p.xii.

<sup>23</sup> As attested in "How Tissot conceives his pictures", in *Light*, 20 April, 1899, pp. 202-203.

integrated way of life and a belief-system, and it was with great earnestness that spiritualists underwent regular attempts to transmit messages from the 'other' world. In an analysis of the occult and its relationship to science, *The Occult Sciences* (1891), Waite summarises the qualities needed to be a medium:

[There are only] two classes - those earnest seekers into the interior problems of being who desire to attain to the permanent actualities which they believe underlie the appearances of the external universe, who are sufficiently absorbed by the fundamental hypotheses of religion to be anxious for their religious verification, who yearn, in the language of the mystics, to find their souls, who are probing the bases of faith, who are in search of an instrument of intercourse with the divine source of life. [The second group have] entered into the interior light, and on the path of spiritual evolution.<sup>24</sup>

Through their experiments with mediumship, the De Morgan's could be considered to belong to both of Waite's categories of spiritualist investigation.

Like De Morgan's art, *The Result of an Experiment* contains a wide range of literary and philosophical sources, including references to Egyptian pharaohs, Leper angels and the possibilities of reincarnation. The language of this book is lyrical and visionary, typical of the prominent spiritual literature of this era. It is clearly influenced by the Symbolist movement in France and Belgium, initiated by the literary innovations of the 1880s, through the works of Gustave Kahn, Jean Morés, Charles Morice, Paul Adam and Georges Vanor.<sup>25</sup> De Morgan's works show correlations with The Rose + Croix group, which, under Joséphin Peladan,

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<sup>24</sup> A. Waite, *The Occult Sciences*, pp.265-266.

<sup>25</sup> See J. Simpson, *Aurier, Symbolism and the Visual Arts*, Burne: Peter Lang, 1999.

produced Symbolist literature and art in the late nineteenth century. These writings and ideas were introduced into Britain through writers such as Pater, Swinburne, and also through the exchange of artists, including Rossetti and Burne-Jones. Jean Delville, a Symbolist painter, also wrote extensively on the correspondence between art and the spirit. His publication *The New Mission of Art* (English Translation: 1910) is an attempt to elucidate the correlation of art and the soul, using language very similar to De Morgan's automatic enterprise. In De Morgan's dialogues, a dynamic Platonic structure of the soul, light and resurrection emerges. De Morgan combines Plato's philosophy of the Ideal with contemporary concerns of society in both her automatic writing and in her paintings, along with an intensely personal vision of an elevated human spirit. The growth of spiritual groups, such as the Theosophical Society, established by the Russian, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky may also have indirectly influenced De Morgan, although there is no documentary evidence that either Evelyn or William ever joined such an organisation.<sup>26</sup> To explain what Theosophy (meaning divine knowledge, or science<sup>27</sup>) encompassed, Blavatsky reiterates the metaphor of light breaking through spiritual and moral blindness, as those who accept Theosophy will discover "the essence of all religion and of absolute truth".<sup>28</sup> With its debt to ancient esoteric Eastern religions, Theosophy appealed to a diverse following, using, like many spiritualist groups, a synthesis of "science and metaphysics"<sup>29</sup> and neo-Platonism, to validate its

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<sup>26</sup> However, the De Morgans were both interested in current issues and debates, and many of the themes of theosophy would have close affinities with their spiritualist beliefs.

<sup>27</sup> Shearer West demonstrates how Theosophy came to characterise the mood of *fin-de-siècle* nineteenth century. *Fin de Siècle: Art and Society in an Age of Uncertainty*, London: Bloomsbury, 1993, p.115.

<sup>28</sup> H. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1914, p.40.

<sup>29</sup> J. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p.193.

propositions. Blavatsky's writing style is reminiscent of De Morgan's automatic correspondences. In *The Key to Theosophy* (1893), Blavatsky describes the ascent of spiritual development:

As the sun of truth rises higher and higher on the horizon of man's perception, and each coloured ray [of the spectrum] gradually fades out until it is finally reabsorbed in its turn, humanity will at last be cursed no longer with artificial polarisations but will find itself bathing in the pure colourless sunlight of eternal truth. And this will be Theosophia.<sup>30</sup>

Although purporting to be an explanation of Theosophy, most of Blavatsky's elaborate propositions serve only to obscure, rather than to illuminate meaning. There are obvious similarities with De Morgan's writing, in *The Result of an Experiment*, as an angel declares:

You are in the mire but on the verge of a new birth, and light is breaking. Sickness and troubles are not realities; they are phantoms bred of the mire. Realities are life, light, hope, and expansion of the power of thought, till in the end Infinity is grasped, and brightness such as you never dream of attained. I am the Leper Angel who once trod the earth in pain, and now to me life is a continuous advancement in the path of light.<sup>31</sup>

The similarities in both theme and style of these esoteric writings reveal the widespread influence of spiritualism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and

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<sup>30</sup> H. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p.40.

<sup>31</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.32.

the pivotal status of an eternal soul, or afterlife, which dominates all spiritualist research. This emphasis on everlasting existence is established at the beginning of Stirling's *William De Morgan and His Wife*, where before the Preface, there is an illustration of a small figure, called a "Composite Monogram" [Ill.15] designed for the couple by William De Morgan. The design, made up of straight lines and circles, appears to suggest two sources: both underpinned by the idea of immortality and rebirth. First, it can be seen as a derivative of the shape of the Chinese logo of a peach tree where both the tree and its fruit are symbols of immortality. A peach tree is also commonly used in De Morgan's ceramic decorations, where the shape forms the character 'shou' which also means eternal life. As William De Morgan used a variety of Eastern mythological and religious symbols in his ceramic pots and tiles, it can be assumed that he was deliberately utilising the familiar Eastern connotations of the immortal peach tree. William De Morgan's Eastern influence is also revealed in the designs inspired by the interest in Islamic art and culture, and also in the production of mythical beasts, such as snakes and birds. Catleugh argues that Eastern culture was central to De Morgan's designs from the 1870s onwards "when the South Kensington Museum started to buy and exhibit Turkish ceramics and textiles and Persian carpets, the impact on men like [William] Morris and De Morgan was immediate".<sup>32</sup>

The second reading of this motif, suggesting a combination of these sources, is startling in its similarity with primitive African art motifs of displayed females. These contain "implied elements of sexual curiosity, viewing the female as sexual object and the female role as bearer of children".<sup>33</sup> Here, the spread-eagled

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<sup>32</sup> J. Catleugh, *William De Morgan Tiles*, Somerset: Richard Dennis, 1991, p.75. Catleugh also quotes William Morris who said in a lecture 'The History of Pattern Making' "to us pattern-designers, Persia has become a Holy Land" (p.75).

<sup>33</sup>T. Philips, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, Munich & New York: Prestel, 1996, p.258.

figure, presented in De Morgan's composition in an almost identical position to the African motif, is encoded with the regenerative power of childbearing, and hence, the spiritual idea of rebirth. This is an extension of the widely-held belief that women were conduits of spiritual power, and therefore closer to an 'essential' nature. Similar figures are also used in African initiation rituals in the form of head-dresses worn by males when they "undergo a ritual death and rebirth".<sup>34</sup> The nineteenth century interest in anthropology would have enabled the De Morgans to visit so-called primitive exhibitions held at the British Museum and to become familiar with the formal characteristics of these art forms, which were thought to reveal universal symbolic archetypes. Recent feminist scholars have argued persuasively that birth symbols are incorporated into traditional women's art, and suggest a desire for both a celebration of the reproductive facility of the female, and also emphasise the mystical connotations of the cycle of birth and death<sup>35</sup> [Ill.16]. These images, therefore, correspond closely to De Morgan's spiritualist concepts of resurrection and renewal. In the following sections, the recurring theme of rebirth and eternal spirit life in De Morgan's art and writings will be assessed within its contemporary framework of ideas, beginning with, what was perhaps the most influential of theories: Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, 1859.

## 2.2 The Impact of Darwin

Charles Darwin, the naturalist and scientist, produced a theory of human evolution based on the origin of an ancestor common to all life forms. This

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.460.

<sup>35</sup> *The Birth Symbol in traditional Women's Art from Eurasia and the Western Pacific*, Toronto: the Museum for Textiles, 1981.

had implications so profound that it was to undermine irrevocably the fundamental concepts of religion in particular, and become an argument for all kinds of doctrines, such as Christian socialism and social reform, spiritualism and atheism. *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, can be seen as a triumph of empirical, rationalist science, yet simultaneously, it sparked a crisis in Christianity. With the underlying affirmation of a lack of a providential design, Darwin's assertions about natural selection and change through mutation of form implicitly deny Divine Creation, especially that given in Book Four of Genesis. Darwin makes this clear by outlining the descent of species from a common ancestor:

Therefore, on the principle of natural selection with divergence of character, it does not seem incredible that, from such low and intermediate form, both animals and plants may have been developed; and, if we admit this, we must likewise admit that all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth may be descended from some one primordial form.<sup>36</sup>

In Darwin's theory, which was underpinned by scrupulous empirical research, the struggle for survival depends on a species' continual change and adaptation to its environment. Darwin provided a new timescale for this adaptation which suggested evolving stages over thousands of years. However, in the Book of Genesis, God formed the world in seven days, creating distinct and immutable species: a direct contrast to evolutionary principles. To the spiritualists, however, the problems raised by Darwinian evolution could be subsumed into their belief, as a letter to the editor of a spiritualist publication shows:

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<sup>36</sup> C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (ed.), G. Beer, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.396. Hereafter cited as C. Darwin, *Origin of Species*.

I, for one accept the truth of Mr Darwin's theory of man's origin and believe that we have ascended physically from those lower forms of creation [...] But the theory contains only one-half of the explanation of man's origins, and needs Spiritualism to carry it through and complete it [...] Mr Darwin's theory does not in the least militate against ours - we think it necessitates it; he simply does not deal with our side of the subject.<sup>37</sup>

Sophia De Morgan's *From Matter to Spirit*, also employed the evolutionary metaphor of species in general to the progression of the spirit, using scientific language to emphasise the legitimacy of her views. The connection between the mind and the body is set out in some detail, drawing on physiological knowledge to explain the bond between cause and effect. Sophia De Morgan argues, for example, that "it is electricity that moves the arm, but there is a spirit that guides the electricity".<sup>38</sup> The book discusses examples of mediumship at length, as well as interpretations of the afterlife. In a passage which is clearly influenced by Darwin, De Morgan describes the development of the spirit by what she calls "the action of successive waves of influx in creation":

In the mineral, then in the vegetable, then in the animal world-higher still, its descent into the mind, where it operates as intelligence; and, finally, its more direct influx, giving spiritual life and impression to the soul of man. Every wave forms an age, period, or day, and each wave, acting on the conditions prepared for it by its forerunner, leaves the world one degree higher in development and refinement,

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in J. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p.270.

<sup>38</sup> S. De Morgan, *From Matter to Spirit*, p.107.



so that the last age is always one degree in advance of the preceding.<sup>39</sup>

This spiritualist and pseudo-scientific appropriation of Darwin's ideas is typical of the way science was reconciled to spiritualist doctrine. However, De Morgan adds a footnote where she reveals her antipathy to Darwin's 'one primordial form' stating that "a development by successive outpourings of creative power [similar to John Ruskin's Natural Theology] is very different from that by which our pedigree is traced from apes and monkeys".<sup>40</sup> For those who believed in the exalted state of the human soul, a suggestion of descent from 'apes and monkeys' had to be repudiated. Indeed, both the divine status of the human soul and its spiritual affinity with evolution of species, is emphasised in the spirit teachings published by Stainton Moses, which, like *The Result of an Experiment*, offer didactic messages from angels and spirits:

Matter on your globe has gone through divers (*sic*) stages from crystallisation - the rudest form of organisation to man. The rock and earth yield to plants. Vegetable life supersedes mineral. Sensation added, a nervous system given, and another form of more highly organised life is found progressively being developed from the lowest zoophyte up to man. Each step is an advance from the last, and man crowns the labour of creation. Man differs in kind, as well as in degree, by virtue of his divine soul.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.345.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> W. Stainton Moses, *More Spirit Teachings*, London: Spiritualist Press, 1885, repr. 1952, p.91.

In Evelyn De Morgan's *The Result of An Experiment*, long passages incorporate both Moses's and Sophia De Morgan's philosophy, with a striking Darwinian emphasis on continuity through change, symbolised by the soul's ascent in ever-increasing planes to a celestial level of pure light. This is shown, for example, in the Leper Angel's description of the progress of the spirit, from embodiment to incorporeality:

Slowly, most slowly, self in its worst form will die. Then a new self, better, but still self, will lament ever and ever on the wretchedness of his earth-life, till finally that self will be lost in a great passion of love and pity, and his spirit will rise purified into the heavens where the sun shines and the light of God is over all.<sup>42</sup>

This theme of natural selection was also the subject of Alfred Russel Wallace's work which actually spurred Darwin on in the race to publication. In the introduction to *Origin of Species*, Darwin notes:

My work is now nearly finished: but as it will take me two or three more years to complete it, and as my health is far from strong, I have been urged to publish this Abstract. I have more especially been induced to do this, as Mr Wallace, who is now studying the natural history of the Malay archipelago, has arrived at almost exactly the same general conclusions that I have on the origin of species. Last year he sent me a memoir on this subject, with a request that I would forward it to Sir Charles Lyell, who sent it to the Linnean Society [...] Sir C. Lyell and Dr Hooker [suggested it

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<sup>42</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.121.

would be] advisable to publish, with Mr Wallace's excellent memoir, some brief extracts from my manuscripts. <sup>43</sup>

Unlike Darwin, whose atheism became more pronounced during his lifetime, Wallace was both an evolutionist *and* a high-profile spiritualist, who wrote and lectured regularly on the confederation of science and religion. His particular area of concern was, like De Morgan, the progression of the soul after the death of the corporeal body. Wallace observes:

These three distinct stages of progress from the inorganic world of matter and motion up to man, point clearly to an unseen universe, to a world of spirit, to which the world of matter is altogether subordinate [...] Those who admit my interpretation of the evidence now adduced - strictly scientific evidence in its appeal to the facts which are clearly what ought *not* to be on the materialistic theory - will be able to accept the spiritual nature of man, as not in any way inconsistent with the theory of evolution, but as dependent on those fundamental laws and causes which furnish the very materials for evolution to work with.<sup>44</sup>

Those caught between the materialist empiricism of science, and its denial of the existence of a spirit or soul, and those searching for new evidence to prove this existence, could be accommodated in Wallace's highly respected evolutionary paradigm. As the Bishop of Carlisle argues:

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<sup>43</sup> C. Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p.3.

<sup>44</sup> A.R. Wallace, quoted in "The Bishop of Carlisle on Wallace's 'Darwinism'", in *Light*, 22 March, 1890, p.143.

What Mr Darwin did not deny, and what Mr Wallace emphatically affirms, namely, that there is needed for the explanation of phenomena something beyond, and essentially different form, the process of natural selection. All seems to point beyond matter into the region of mind, beyond mechanical sequence to purpose, beyond all *vera causa* to the *causa causarum*, beyond Nature to God.<sup>45</sup>

This Platonist version of an absolute ideal, formed part of the nineteenth-century belief which can be summarised as "a dynamic conception of nature as an organic unity tending towards a goal of perfection, a belief that this process is mirrored in the spiritual education of the individual".<sup>46</sup>

De Morgan's painting *The Valley of Shadows* (1899) [Ill.17] illustrates this evolutionary struggle, as described by Wallace. It is an imposing work, being a canvas of 49½ x 76". There is a text which accompanies this painting, inscribed on a rock in the foreground:

Dark is the valley of Shadows;  
Empty the power of Kings;  
Blind is the favour of Fortune;  
Hungry the Caverns of Death;  
Dim is the Light from Beyond;  
Unanswered the Riddle of Life<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> S. Blackburn, *Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.2.

<sup>47</sup> There is some doubt over the authorship of this poem. It has been attributed to Alice Fleming, who was herself a spiritualist, and a niece of the Burne-Jones's and a close friend of Evelyn and William. However, in Stirling's notebook, *Pictures, etc.*, already purchased with details, DMFA, Stirling notes of this painting "with verses on it by Evelyn De Morgan".

The themes of this poem are echoed in the painting, so that it is the interchange between text and imagery which emphasises the moral message. The title of the painting comes from the twenty-third Psalm, and possibly, from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678),<sup>48</sup> and it portrays the thorny path of life which leads to the progression of the soul: from its dark, elementary earthly beginnings, to the possibility of redemption through eternal life. Characteristic of her style, which remains consistent throughout her career, De Morgan's sense of rhythm and spatial harmony produces a balanced composition, working in the traditional model of intersecting triangular planes, drawing the viewer's eye back and forth across the horizontal axis of the canvas, in keeping with the narrative progression of the migrating souls. A procession of single-file figures, richly adorned in sumptuous, pastel-tinted draperies, are making their way along the narrow and treacherous path. They are surrounded by swirling mists, jagged, barren mountains, and classical ruins. The centre of the painting is dominated by a young woman kneeling, and this is the focus of the work: this is the pivotal turning point, where the souls can look upwards, to light and renewal, turn left, to the confinement of material concerns, or turn right into the darkness of despair. De Morgan uses allegorical figures to suggest the difficulties which can assail and distract the spirit from the true path: there is Blind Fortune, haphazardly dispensing her gifts, and in front of the fractured pillars on the left of the painting, stands a king, with one foot resting on the supine body of a bound and naked woman. As in the accompanying poem, the king has no power after death, and clings hopelessly to his possessions:

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<sup>48</sup>Judy Oberhausen discusses this as a literary influence: see "Evelyn De Morgan and spiritualism", in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings* (ed.), C. Gordon, p.42.

his fine garments and spear, and, most significantly, his slave. Elise Smith has drawn attention to the pessimistic themes embodied by these two figures:

Matter and materialism are associated primarily (and most actively) with the male [... the slave is] wrapped in ropes to suggest not only her confinement as a slave, but also the bondage of material wealth (and perhaps, even more broadly, of embodiment itself), she is held servile by the male king.<sup>49</sup>

However, De Morgan's projection of the path from life to death can also be seen as an optimistic one, where human beings, endowed with intelligence and morality, have free choice over their destiny; and while some refuse to look up and acknowledge this, others will do so, and comprehend the spiritual light. The golden rays of light cut through the gloom of the valley with a shaft of luminous colour. It radiates over the kneeling woman, who looks up to see the exalted souls who have already embraced the light and have been set free from their earthly bonds. According to the principle embodied by the Leper Angel who is reborn from slow and painful death into spiritual purity, the figures on the right who are morally or spiritually deficient cannot raise themselves from their position, and travel on into the darkness, with heads bowed and weary in attitude. However, as the Leper angel suggests, it will only be a matter of time and these too, will grow and develop into higher forms of existence. In *The Result of An Experiment*, the Leper Angel symbolises the theme of this painting:

In your life there are many thorns and you long for a peace that never comes. I, the Leper Angel, who trod the earth in pain and

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<sup>49</sup> E. Lawton Smith, unpublished draft MS, *'Dim is the Light from Beyond': the Impact of Spiritualism in Evelyn De Morgan's Nocturnal Imagery*, 1996, p.14.

great trouble, come to tell you that though the body be weak and  
the days dark, the end is in sight. Your song shall be sung and your  
passing be joyful.<sup>50</sup>

To emphasise the elevated concept of this work, De Morgan uses a highly intricate range of colours to signify elements of the spiritual status. The principal figure of the woman, with her expression of rapt concentration, stands out in her distinct red attire. Her vivid carmine cloak is a radiant symbol of the life-principle<sup>51</sup>. According to Anna Jameson, in *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), red "signified fire, divine love, the Holy Spirit, heat or the creative power".<sup>52</sup> Red is "the colour of the soul, of the libido, and of the heart. It is the colour of knowledge and of esoteric law forbidden to the uninitiated".<sup>53</sup> The use of red in this painting, clearly falls into this category, of soul and immortality. Red does, however, have other more subversive connotations, which although do not fit so neatly into the apparent meaning of the work, may reveal some consequential significance for De Morgan's feminist agenda. The use of red may also connote the taboo of the womb and menstruation, again linking women with the very essence of the mystery of life, a notion which De Morgan explores successively in her career, only here the red is a reminder of death, as the ancient Greeks saw the womb as the site "in which life and death are transmuted the one into the other".<sup>54</sup> The colour red here also signals a series of sub-textual meanings, at the centre of which is the female, who, like the womb itself, becomes a matrix of life and death, confinement and freedom, mystery

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<sup>50</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.152.

<sup>51</sup> J. Chevalier, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Oxford and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1994, p.792.

<sup>52</sup> A. Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol. I, London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1848, p.xlv.

<sup>53</sup> J. Chevalier, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p.793.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

and enlightenment. The rich, lustrous use of colour is one of the distinguishing characteristics of De Morgan's work, and it is in the possibilities suggested by the symbolic properties ascribed to colour, that her work can be seen to incorporate and develop spiritualist themes. Indeed, colour symbolism was a topic debated in the spiritualist press, and also at meetings of the British National Association of Spiritualists, which the De Morgans attended. In one lecture, directly relating to De Morgan's works, Pre-Raphaelite colour symbolism is discussed, particularly with reference to works by Burne-Jones and Millais, where it was argued that:

These symbols, derived from early Christians, were adapted by them from those in use and thus they have gradually lost their original esoteric meaning [...] When the real teaching of these and still grander symbols shall be more truly known [...] the true meanings of colour and its typical representations will be new knowledge. The power and symbolism of colour is yet only in its infancy.<sup>55</sup>

The allegorical function, underpinned by colour symbolism, parallels the themes of the automatic transcripts, and produces an account of change and development which draws on the paradigm offered by Darwin's framework of evolutionary principles. Whilst De Morgan's writing appears to be drawn from the scientific language of evolutionary theory, the impetus behind her writing and paintings corresponds closely to Wallace's revision of Darwinism. Wallace deals directly with the atheism suggested by Darwin's research. In an analysis of the development of the human faculties of conscience, morality and mathematical/artistic skills, Wallace argues:

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<sup>55</sup> Mme. De Steiger, "Art and the Supernatural" a paper read to the British National Association of Spiritualists, 4 April, printed in *Light*, 23 April, 1881, pp.122-123.



[In the case of] man's intellectual and moral nature, I propose to show that certain definite portions of it could not have been developed by variation and natural selection alone, and that therefore, some other influence, law, or agency is required to account for them. If this can be shown [...] we shall be justified in assuming that the same unknown cause or power may have had a much wider influence, and may have profoundly influenced the whole course of his development.<sup>56</sup>

These ideas, published in the 1880s, coincide with the De Morgan's automatic writing sessions. It seems clear that she and William believed implicitly that their automatic writing sessions were genuine interactions between the material world and spirits which inhabited that 'other' world: an issue raised by Stirling:

It is an interesting question how far the conjunction of two rare minds, acting in complete harmony, sufficed to produce a rare development; but to the self-constituted mediums it seemed that an influence external to their consciousness evolved every phase.<sup>57</sup>

The themes which recur throughout *The Result of An Experiment* not surprisingly correspond with De Morgan's own beliefs, and are explored in her paintings. In this way, Darwinian notions of the mutation of organic species in the struggle for adaptation to the environment become metaphors for the progression towards a perfect state, of the soul after death. This desire to reconcile and ultimately to unify science with religion is not surprising in an epoch of such rapid change and

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<sup>56</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism*, London: Macmillan, 1889, pp.463-464.

<sup>57</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.356.

upheaval, despite Darwin's attempts to render his claims of change and continuity as a new kind of beauty, as in a passage which uses a 'tangled bank' as a metaphor for the struggle of life:

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us [...] Thus from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of higher animals, directly follows.<sup>58</sup>

De Morgan appears to draw on both the language, and Darwin's theoretical proposition here to support her idea of the relationship between the concrete and incorporeal planes of existence in her paintings. In her large oil painting *The Kingdom of Heaven Suffereth Violence and the Violent Take It By Force* (c.1907-19) [Ill.18] the title is taken from Matthew 11:12 in the Bible, and refers to the prophecy by John the Baptist about the coming of the Messiah. This would seem to be an oblique reference to the saving of the soul, and the content of the painting makes this explicit. It is one of De Morgan's largest paintings, being an imposing 54¾ x 31¾" and it employs a striking use of space. It is an upright, vertical panel, with a central female figure, surrounded by draped female forms, an endless repetition of a female prototype who shares a physical likeness to De Morgan herself. The composition is structured through harmonious principles of symmetry,

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<sup>58</sup> C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, p.395-396.

generated by the rhythmic gestures of the spirits which inhabit the lower planes of the painting. This series of souls are struggling to free themselves from a vortex of pain and confusion. De Morgan traces the gradual ascent of the soul into the light, at the top left-hand portion of the painting. In order to reach this attainment, the spirit must disavow all its material links and confinements, represented by weighty chains and a crushed demeanour, and finally reach its destination as a disembodied soul, represented by a haloed head and angel wings. It is a work which integrates spiritualist convictions with an evolutionary model of change and development. Stirling regards this painting as the embodiment of De Morgan's religious expression<sup>59</sup> and these themes provide the inspiration for much of her work.

The figures in the lower half of the painting generate a powerful sense of desolation and oppression. It is significant that all the figures are female, and the bonds of the physical world could well serve as metaphors for the constraints surrounding women, illustrating the material boundaries they encounter because of the limitations imposed on their gender in life. In this way, this painting offers a potent correlation with spiritual, and in particular, female, emancipation. It would seem that De Morgan deliberately makes the female form the vehicle for this transformation from matter to spirit. When the souls in the painting reach the nirvana of the light, they discard the heavy body (implicitly the biological female anatomy) and are transformed into androgynous countenances, surrounded by a heavenly aura. The narrative and compositional structure suggests that for De Morgan, freedom from the material also meant liberation from the artificially imposed feminine codes of behaviour, as the highest ideal state is depicted as essentially asexual, and therefore beyond gender distinctions.

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<sup>59</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.357.

Like individual species in Darwin's evolutionary process, the women in the painting develop from rudimentary beings, crushed by age, despair and disease, but most of all by lack of faith and vision. They emerge and hover on the precipice of a rocky abyss: a vivid array of female expressions and gestures of hopelessness. The monochrome tones; sombre greys and browns, symbolically illustrate the corresponding spiritual impairment. This accords with the many mentions of the earthly 'mire' which occur in *The Result of An Experiment* in which humans exist, before death and the concomitant spiritual enlightenment raises them to the elevated states of spiritual growth. The central figure, which had been described as the Kingdom of Earth<sup>60</sup> is juxtaposed against the grey, fettered and imprisoned women, by her dynamic, confident bearing, and her iridescent violet draperies. As in *The Valley of Shadows*, colour symbolism heightens and develops the spiritualist aesthetic cultivated by De Morgan. Violet or mauve is a spiritual metaphor, being made up of equal parts of red and blue. This makes it:

The colour of temperance, clarity of mind, deliberate action, of balance between heaven and earth, senses and spirit, passion and reason, love and wisdom [...] in Western society the colour became that of mourning or of half-mourning. This more sharply conjures the notion of death *not as a state, but as a phase*<sup>61</sup> (My italics).

Colour, then, in De Morgan's paintings, moves them beyond what Roland Barthes calls primary signification (the recognition that the woman wears a violet garment) to secondary connotations, (religious or mystical interpretations of the symbolic applications of violet) where the artist has drawn on the wide sources of the

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<sup>60</sup> P. Yates, "Evelyn De Morgan's use of literary sources in her paintings" in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings* (ed.), C. Gordon, p.66.

<sup>61</sup> J. Chevalier, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, pp.1068-69.

existing cultural repertoire of polysemic signs.<sup>62</sup> De Morgan appears to be drawing on contemporary sources for her colour symbolism, including spiritualist interests in colour, and also in the works of Jameson, who notes that in Christian iconography violet "signified love and truth; or passion and suffering, hence it is the colour often worn by the martyrs".<sup>63</sup> This appraisal of the colour violet has strong correspondence with De Morgan's attempts, throughout her work, to replace the dominance of male hierarchies of religion and spirituality with feminised versions. Indeed, this is supported by Jameson's contention that violet is also worn by the Virgin "after the crucifixion" and also by Christ himself "after his resurrection".<sup>64</sup> In this painting, then, there is strong evidence to support my argument that De Morgan's agenda is self-consciously structured around an unorthodox re-envisioning of spiritualised, and feminised, figures, underpinned by an evolutionary paradigm of progression through the emphasis on resurrection and redemption, illustrated effectively in this painting. By examining her paintings in their specific cultural context of De Morgan's spiritualist belief and the scientific stimulus of theological re-evaluation, De Morgan's works can be seen as a resolution and exchange between the tensions of the concrete body and the intangible soul. The emphasis of this exchange is mediated by De Morgan through the process of evolution, incorporating the transmutation of Darwin's evolving species into the artist's vision of the developing soul, and this vision itself is powerfully mediated through the esoteric potential of colour symbolism. The theme of this painting in its evolving soul are present in much spiritualist writing of the period. It symbolises the optimism of the spiritualists in the face of Christian re-evaluation, and the new

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<sup>62</sup> R. Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, trans. A.Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.

<sup>63</sup> A. Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol. I, pp.xlv-xlvi .

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xlv-xlvi.

desire to form an alliance between science and spiritualism. A spirit recapitulates this in Stainton Moses's book, *Spirit Teachings* (1883):

We believe that far - far in the vast hereafter there will be a period at which progressive souls will eventually arrive, when progress has brought them to the very dwelling place of the Omnipotent, and that there they will lay aside their former state, and bask in the full light of Deity, in contemplation of all the secrets of the universe.<sup>65</sup>

Other expressions of the correspondence between the physical and metaphysical in this painting are made explicit through the repetition of well-established motifs, drawn from Western and Eastern religions and used in art for many centuries. The ornate crown of her head, along with the outstretched arms and positive stance, is perhaps, reminiscent of Titian's *Assumption* (1516-18) [Ill.19], where the central figure, the Virgin Mary, rises to take her place in heaven<sup>66</sup>. There are several parallels between the two paintings, such as the opulent violet/pink draperies worn by both women, the outstretched, protective gesture, the dynamic ascension emphasised by the spiralling upwards rhythm, and the accompanying host of cherubs/angels. The compositional and formal structure also has similarities, such as the ascension from the dark to the light, and the tangible division between the material and the divine planes, symbolised by the colour transformation between the higher and the lower regions. Titian's work, of course is an interpretation of the powerful apocryphal tales of the life of the Virgin,

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<sup>65</sup> W. Stainton Moses, *Spirit Teachings*, London: Spiritualist Press, 1883, repr. 1949, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> De Morgan's frequent visits to Italy from 1876 onwards, included several trips to Venice, during which time she became acquainted with the Venetian Renaissance artists. She would certainly have been very familiar with Titian, initially through Poynter's influence at the Slade School of Art, and later through her own visits.

and presents the imagined event of the Virgin's assumption into heaven. The parallels with De Morgan's work are striking here, as the assumption story hinges on the importance of both the physical body and the soul entering heaven together, therefore remaining intact and incorruptible. De Morgan draws on conventional religious iconography, but uses it for original and discrete strategies. By using established art conventions, and assimilating them into her own visions of the eternal nature of life, death and rebirth, De Morgan engages with issues which are contemporary and also personal. *The Kingdom of Heaven* draws upon the dual assumption of the spiritualist belief in the ascendancy of the soul, framed through a desire for a physical and psychic space and freedom for females, whose forms dominate the painting, and even produce a subverted representation of a woman in the place of a Christ figure.

To show the gradual path towards the ideal state, De Morgan uses just four women, including the central figure, and again she blends religious iconography with Platonic metaphors, such as the spiritual blindness signalled by the bandaged eyes, and the Christian symbol of the Crown of Thorns, suggesting a female martyrdom, in keeping with De Morgan's feminist re-interpretation of the relation of women to spiritual elevation. The delicately painted, diaphanous rainbow colours, which characterise and distinguish many of De Morgan's works, tinge the draperies of the women who are breaking free. The gowns of purple, green, violet, and sienna, are significant in De Morgan's work: they are collectively a representation of the prismatic colours which together make up the pure, or white light, which is the configuration of the soul's aspiration towards perfection. This is a spiritualist idea which is also evident in Blavatsky's Theosophy doctrine<sup>67</sup>, and yet,

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<sup>67</sup> Above, p.7.

also draws upon scientific knowledge of the splitting of 'pure' white light to reveal its compound colours.

Surrounding these women, with their golden halos and soaring forms, is a soft ether. The concepts of ether as embodying important properties was a popular nineteenth-century concept, influential until the early twentieth century. From the Greek for "the upper air beyond the moon",<sup>68</sup> ether carried connotations of other-worldliness, yet it also had a perceived basis in scientific 'fact' as it was used as an anaesthetic, and also believed to be a medium which could "permeate space and fill the interstices between particles of matter".<sup>69</sup> The latter definition of ether conforms entirely with De Morgan's quest for the progression of corporeal existence to the incorporeal. Ether was also, inaccurately, believed to be the medium through which electromagnetic waves were thought to be transmitted. Ether, then, becomes the agent for scientific and spiritual synthesis, powerfully symbolising the threshold of both worlds. Indeed, ether became a legitimate subject which occupied both scientific and philosophic analysis. In an article in *Light*, taken from *The Echo* (1891), called "The Ether between the Worlds" the peculiar properties of ether are examined:

Light must be propagated through a medium of some kind, which was called the Aether or Ether, as representing the thinnest aery conception for which we have a word. So for scores of years the best energies of the most competent mathematicians and natural philosophers have been devoted to attacking the problem, "What is this Ether? What are its properties and conditions?" *The two*

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<sup>68</sup> M. Warner, *The Inner Eye: Art Beyond the Visible*, London: National Touring Exhibitions, 1996, p.39.

<sup>69</sup> *COD*, Eighth edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.



*questions, this of the Ether, and the other one of the intimate constitution of ordinary matter in all its forms, are the most important subjects, perhaps, for our mastery of the secrets of the universe, and, doubtless, have within them untold revelations of order, beauty, and power, as fruitful in their practical applications as steam and electricity.*<sup>70</sup>(My italics)

The prevailing preoccupation with assimilating science into the realms of the supernatural is characteristic of the science/religion debate explored by De Morgan through art. These ideas are developed in pictorial form in De Morgan's paintings in the recurrent use of symbolic motifs such as ether. Ether can be seen to function as a signifier in this way in *The Kingdom of Heaven*: appearing in the painting approximately half-way through the soul's journey, between the physical earth and the spiritual heaven. The colours used to mark the manifestation of ether, work, like the draperies of the women, to produce new symbolic and spiritualist meanings developed in De Morgan's painting. The swirling mass of pearlescent pinks, mauves and blues suggest a pathway, or bridge, which links heavenly and earthly realms. It is a potent symbol of the intangible, but, to De Morgan, irrefutable, spirit world, made manifest by discernible, though insubstantial, matter. A reference to the upheaval created by the expansion of scientific knowledge is made in one of the automatic transcripts, linking the impact of science to the spirit world:

But they say that Science will once again rekindle hope, only to be promptly changed into despair by the nature of the revelations that can be got. Science can only reveal the physical either in your world or ours. The spiritual can only be seen by the spirit, and the

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<sup>70</sup> "The Ether in between the Worlds", in *Light*, 29 August, 1891, pp.412 - 413.

reason Art is of vital importance in the scheme of life is that it depends for its very existence on certain spiritual laws not known on earth, only guessed at.<sup>71</sup>

The reference to man's 'despair' in the 'revelations' of science, is almost certainly an allusion to Darwin's controversial findings, and it is interesting that art, elevated to a universal 'Art', is recommended as a crucial link between the concrete and the discrete planes of existence: an idea which can be traced through all of De Morgan's spiritually-inspired works.

Several of De Morgan's other paintings depict the same visual dramatisation of the elevation of the soul after death. *Gloria in Excelsis* (1893) [Ill.20] illustrates the immortality of life on earth. There are two central, full-length female angels standing in front of a rocky pool against a background of rocks, the sea and an over-arching summer sky. Above them are numerous images of almost identical cherub faces, framed by delicate blue wings, and encompassed by an aura of golden light, which emanates down towards the ground. The broken shingle which surrounds their bare feet is interspersed with flowers, painted with Pre-Raphaelite characteristic attention to minute detail. These flowers are all recognisable British species, such as daisies, roses, and primroses, supporting the idea that this is not meant to be a literal interpretation of heaven, but a further affirmation that the divine is to be found on earth. The title, meaning 'glory in the highest' refers to the spiritual state of revelation and acceptance, rather than the material circumstances which surround it. The message of eternal life is reinforced in the symbolic use of peacock feathers intricately interwoven with the feathers in the wings of the angel on the right. In Christian tradition, as well as Buddhist

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<sup>71</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.147.

religions, the peacock symbolises immortality because of the radiating pattern on its tail. The peacock is also used extensively in Renaissance art, where it also functions with the pagan meaning of immortality, as it was believed that the flesh of the peacock was incorruptible. This painting has parallels with the ideas of natural theology, promoted by Ruskin, in which all aspects of the material world are seen to be imbued with a divine essence, so that the smallest of flowers, and the brightest of skies are all equally significant in the Providential scheme of things. However, this painting also draws on evolutionary principles of progression from primordial and primitive forms, with the background portraying only the basic primeval elements of bare rock, sea and sky, yet presenting the viewer with the vision of radiant angels, the highest state of spiritual enlightenment, who have come to share their message of glory on earth.

These paintings all have a common theme: to depict the transition between life and death, and the gradual development of the soul as it progresses along the hierarchic order, with the underlying agenda, being the attainment of perfection. The relationship between this lofty spirit progression, and Darwin's conclusions in *The Origin of Species*, is not always constant, but shifting and tenuous, as the spiritualists endeavoured to make sense of a threatened cosmic order, attempting, through 'scientific' evidence, to reveal a fundamental purpose of human existence beyond the struggle for survival. In the closing paragraphs of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin's articulates his theory of the ultimate purpose of evolution in a passage which anticipates the convictions of the spiritualist belief in an immortal soul developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century:

Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of great length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend

to progress towards perfection [...] there is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator<sup>72</sup> into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful and been, and are being evolved.<sup>73</sup>

Wallace goes further than Darwin in addressing the consequences of evolution, and attempts to combine the importance of empiricism with the substantiation of spiritualism and the soul's development, in an argument supported by the De Morgans that both matter and spirit co-exist, whilst refuting Darwin's agnostic position:

Modern science utterly fails to realise the nature of mind, or to account for its presence in the universe, except by mere verbal and unthinkable dogma that it is 'the *product*' of organisation.' Spiritualism, on the other hand, recognises in mind the *cause* of organisation, and, perhaps, even of matter itself; and it has greatly added to our knowledge of man's nature by demonstrating the existence of individual minds, indistinguishable from those of human beings, yet separate from any human body.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that the use of the word 'Creator' in this summary paragraph was in fact, only included in later editions of *Origin*, and does not appear in the first edition published in 1859. It has commonly been acknowledged that this alteration was added in an attempt to defuse the controversy caused by Darwin's ultimately atheistic theory of evolution.

<sup>73</sup> C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, p.396.

<sup>74</sup> A. R. Wallace, quoted in "Science and Spiritualism", in *Light*, 28 August, 1886, p.396.

For Wallace, the problem with Darwin's model is that it is unable to account for human consciousness and thus the soul. However, the spiritualist argument draws upon the notion of individual consciousness to underpin Darwin's concept of progression, which becomes a strong metaphor expressed in De Morgan's paintings.

### 2.3 Light in the Darkness: De Morgan's allegories of transformation

There are a series of paintings which embody the theme of light breaking through darkness, revealing hope and salvation to weary souls. Most of them are based around the lines of John 1:5, "And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it". The notion of 'comprehension' is slightly ambivalent, as it can be used to mean a lack of understanding, or the inability, or refusal, to accept, but both meanings could be relevant to these works. De Morgan's works develop several themes from this concept, which effectively communicate her spiritualist doctrines, by using allegory and symbolism. *Lux in Tenebris* (1895) [Ill.21] is from the Latin meaning of 'light in the darkness', and it is also a well-known image of Jesus Christ, exemplified by such popular paintings as Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* (1853-56). De Morgan's variations on these familiar concepts demonstrate her highly personal and feminist interpretations of messianic figures and religious intervention: and the wide range of resources she draws upon, combine in her works to generate new meanings and specifically to disrupt the boundaries of a patriarchal Christian tradition.

*Lux in Tenebris* depicts a floating image of a young woman, clothed in pale gold robes, holding out the olive branch of peace in her right hand. Surrounding her is a shimmering aura of light, radiating out into the darkness that envelops it. The foreground and background is made up of desolate and rugged

rocks, and a dull and oppressive indigo sky is mirrored in the turgid waters below. Out of the darkness of the foreground, almost camouflaged in the torpid inlet, several crocodile creatures lurk with their eyes fixed on the figure above. In Stirling's catalogue entry for this painting a detailed analysis is given:

Light and Beauty are born out of primeval Chaos. The figure of Light is holding the Olive branch of Peace over the world: the transparent aura behind her is egg-shaped to denote Birth. The composition is painted over a gold ground, so that the landscape, seen through the aura, is illuminated by the glow from her presence.<sup>75</sup>

This description is an apt characterisation, but fails to address some important idiosyncrasies. The central figure, once again is a woman. Whilst this in itself, is not remarkable, the context in which De Morgan has placed this woman, is innovative and becomes part of De Morgan's repertoire of female iconography. Drawn from Christian iconography, De Morgan subverts the tradition of showing Christ, or even God, as the bringer of light and hope, replacing them with a figure who seems to have more in common with Botticelli's pagan goddesses. As a metaphor of strength, hope and courage, and, implicitly, divine power, De Morgan's choice of a woman allegorises the virtues of female fortitude and value. This was a strategy adopted by feminist writers in the nineteenth century, where:

Christ appears repeatedly and centrally in women's theologies, in a variety of roles. Perhaps the most significant for mainstream Christianity was the feminised Suffering Saviour, with whom

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<sup>75</sup> *The De Morgan Foundation at Old Battersea House*, Surrey: Saunders and Williams, 1995, p.14, DMFA.

women and other socially disadvantaged groups could readily identify. His suffering encouraged identification, and his resurrection and reign promised power.<sup>76</sup>

The transfiguration of Christ into a female deity was an empowering symbol for nineteenth-century women, and De Morgan's appropriation of a literary device for her spiritualist painting is significant. De Morgan selects and combines elements from eclectic sources in order to formulate alternative codes of representation through which an exploration of shifting networks of female identity is balanced against an evolutionary quasi-religious experience. The conventional academic style of De Morgan transcends the mundane by these complex interventions of feminist and spiritualist belief, making these works challenging and very effective in their imaginative conception and execution. It is hard to connect this artist with the one described by art critics of the time in *The Athenaeum* magazine as lacking "spontaneity, vigour, or originality".<sup>77</sup> In the most recent catalogue of De Morgan's oil paintings, Judy Oberhausen remarks that imagery conjured up in this work "works naturally with the artist's beliefs in a painful development for each person from a low spiritual life to the world of light".<sup>78</sup> Light, and its binary opposite, darkness, arise concurrently in both De Morgan's automatic writings and her art:

Earth is dark and the heavy atmosphere drags on the sullen soil, and  
spirits in the flesh are pressed down by earth-needs and earthly  
pains. Above in the high Heavens light shines; and spirits rise

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<sup>76</sup> J. Melnyk (ed.), *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain. Transfiguring the Faith of their Fathers*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998, pp.xvi-xvii.

<sup>77</sup> [Anon.], *The Athenaeum*, 12 May, 1883, p.609.

<sup>78</sup> J. Oberhausen, "Evelyn De Morgan and spiritualism", in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings* (ed.), C. Gordon, p.69.

rejoicing in upward growth and the great glory of the spirit's manifold development [...] All on earth are in the dark, but above light shines, and it is open to all to reach it.<sup>79</sup>

The aura of light has several properties and potential functions. As Stirling points out, it is egg-shaped, and in many cultures the egg is seen as a symbol of cosmic power of birth, following on from Chaos as a first principle of order.<sup>80</sup> It has been argued that the significance of the egg is not so much through the concept of birth, but through the ideas of rebirth, or resurrection and return. Mircea Eliade states that the concept of this return is "regeneration, [which] as its name indicates, is a new birth [...] a resumption of time from the beginning, that is, a repetition of the cosmogony".<sup>81</sup> As this interpretation emphasises, regeneration and resurrection are removed from the domain of the male, and linked to the origination in the egg or womb of the female. In this painting then, De Morgan is explicitly re-adjusting the balance of power and authority from a male order to a feminist revision. An alternative, but parallel reading of the aura is to see it as a mandorla, which was used in traditional Christian iconography to enclose the figures of Christ, the Virgin and the saints as in the glow of immortality. The word 'mandorla', Italian for almond, represents the mystery of life, and the esoteric symbolism of resurrection. Its shape, like a lozenge, and the life-giving rays of light, symbolises the conjunction of heaven and earth, reinforcing the elevated status of the figure which resides in it.

The womb imagery is a potent allegory in De Morgan's work and in

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<sup>79</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.74.

<sup>80</sup> M.Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p.78. See also Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, Cosmos and History*, London: Penguin, 1989, for further details of cosmology and symbolic representations of rebirth.

<sup>81</sup> M.Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p.54.



this painting in particular, where it is posited as the progenitor of life. This emphasises a reassessment of latent female capability, through De Morgan's painting which derives more from ancient Eastern cultures, than the doctrines of nineteenth-century Christianity.

The primeval beasts waiting in the darkness are another manifestation of the opposing forces of light and dark, a salient theme of spiritualist significance. The imagery of crocodiles is an interesting one, as it has no precedent in academic tradition espoused by the Slade School of Art, or indeed by the Pre-Raphaelite artists. The most dominant association of a crocodile is with negativity and death, and it is mentioned in the Bible, in Job 40:25 and 41:26, where it corresponds to Stirling's description as one of the monsters of primeval chaos. However, in many other cultures, including Egyptian and Asian, resources from which De Morgan returns to repeatedly, the crocodile is celebrated as a male deity: "bull of bulls, great male being".<sup>82</sup> If this notion underlies De Morgan's use of the crocodile, then its depiction in this painting may well function as a covert criticism of the male, where De Morgan is reversing the hierarchic structure of a dominant, life-giving male contrasting with powerless passive, females. Although this interpretation contradicts the ostensibly closed reading of this painting provided by Stirling, it must be remembered that much of Stirling's information in her account of her sister, is based on anecdotal evidence alone, and there is no documentary support for Stirling's schematic account. Although there is no corresponding use of crocodiles in the art of the period, in the mid-nineteenth century, Christina Rossetti, who like De Morgan, was fascinated in spiritualism and notions of the afterlife, refers to crocodiles in her poem *My Dream*, where the crocodile becomes:

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.245.

strikingly patriarchal, with kingly sceptre and orbs. He swells phallically until his incestuous urge is satisfied, and then 'dwindles to the common size' [...] He is also a tyrant and a transgressor, who flouts the law in devouring his own kind. In part this imperious figure seems to represent the dominance of all males.<sup>83</sup>

As with Rossetti's striking use of the crocodile symbolism to invoke concepts of patriarchy, De Morgan's wide-ranging interests in eastern philosophy, socialism, feminism and spiritualism provide, in this instance, a syncretic conception of symbolism in which the crocodile stands in for a primeval, barbaric masculinity, strikingly contrasted with the purity and fortitude of the central female figure who is besieged by the beasts.

A painting which can be considered a companion to *Lux in Tenebris*, takes its title directly from the lines of John 1:5, *The Light Shineth in Darkness and the Darkness Comprehendeth It Not* (1906) [Ill.22]. The composition echoes the simplicity of its predecessor, with the figure of a winged angel, this time enclosed in a mandorla of rainbow hues, surrounded by three naked, and chained women, who cower and conceal their faces in the presence of the angel. The background, as with the earlier painting, is an almost schematic backdrop of sterile, jagged rocks and ominous, lowering sky, sharply juxtaposed by the dominance of the awesome figure of the angel. Almost all De Morgan's central, active and powerful protagonists are women, including this angel. The outstretched arms and gentle expression suggest compassion and patience, despite the rejection

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<sup>83</sup> J. Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, London: Pimlico, 1994, p.167. See pp.166-8 for detailed discussion of *My Dream*. Marsh stresses the dual influence of symbolism from the Middle East in the mid-nineteenth century, and the expression of Victorian patriarchy, on Rossetti's use of the crocodile.

and blindness of the figures before her. The angels which appear frequently in De Morgan's automatic communications reiterate this message of salvation and hope:

All is growth and struggle, and the seeming easy is hard [...] I make my light a beacon to steer you through doubt and darkness [...] once more I bid you raise your eyes from earth, listen to the music of the spheres, make all near you happy, look up and see God.<sup>84</sup>

This painting then, has a theme of hope, potential and change, a direct response to scientific evolutionary theories transposed into the evolution of the soul. This optimistic vision of eventual spiritual enlightenment is a common theme for spiritualists, including Wallace, who argues that it is the elevated faculties of human beings which demonstrates the continuity of a soul, and the potential for development, hinted at in De Morgan's painting:

The special faculties [...] clearly point to the existence in man of something which he has not derived from his animal progenitors - something we may best refer to as being spiritual essence or nature, capable of progressive development under favourable conditions.<sup>85</sup>

De Morgan exploits familiar visual and artistic metaphors and combines them with diverse sources of Christianity, mythology, folklore, symbolism, spiritualism, and contemporary scientific discourses, in order to develop her distinctive themes and ideas of the soul and its transformation from earthly life into eternal life. For De Morgan, painting these intense visions of the soul's transition to the celestial plane, formed an integral part of her artistic vision: one in

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<sup>84</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.82.

<sup>85</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism*, p.474.

which she invested all her artistic direction. The underpinning of scientific empiricism, and Darwinian themes, and the belief in the supernatural is a principal concern in De Morgan's work, and these themes are reflected in contemporary views on this subject:

If science is, as it professes to be, a knowledge of the universe in which we dwell, through the continual discovery of its laws and the ultimate comprehension of causes, then the student of science should close his eyes and ears to no sort of evidence, whether already subjected to classification or not, that may add to his store of knowledge or suggest the pursuit of truth in new directions. To do so is wholly unscientific, and the recusant one can rightly claim to be a student of science no longer. Therefore he cannot turn his back on Spiritualism; for Spiritualism is a diligent observer and collector of facts, and must be admitted to rest wholly on them [...] If spiritual phenomena, as is often said, contradict the laws of nature, all that science has to do is to show that it is already in possession of the entire body of those laws, and consequently has no discoveries to make and not even any truth to verify.<sup>86</sup>

The scientific paradigms of observation and classification incorporated, as this writer suggests, in spiritualist dogma, are clearly manifested in De Morgan's paintings, yet thematically, De Morgan's work is distinguished by its message of optimism through the developing soul, rather than by a faith in scientific rationalism. This is in keeping with the approach adopted by Wallace to Darwinian

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<sup>86</sup> Anon., "Science and Spiritualism", in *Light*, 28 August, 1886, p.396.

evolution: Wallace seeing it as a useful model through which to examine the development of the soul:

Those who admit my interpretation of the evidence now adduced - strictly scientific evidence in its appeal to facts which are clearly what ought *not* to be on the materialistic theory - will be able to accept the spiritual nature of man, as not in any way inconsistent with the theory of evolution, but as dependent on those fundamental laws and causes which furnish the very materials for evolution to work with.<sup>87</sup>

The proposition of spiritual emancipation established in the paintings discussed is always balanced by a contemporary awareness of scientific ascendancy. In *The Result of An Experiment*, De Morgan's angel correspondent declares:

All this [emphasis on scientific study] can only be counteracted by a powerful mysticism that will reveal the life of the spirit, not merely its dimly discerned shell; so that, side by side with the tottering steps of Science penetrating only into the grey unknown, Art, that is the Echo of the Music of the Spheres, will grow and cast boldly aside the attitude of the Earth-worshipper, and proclaim again and again the symbolism of that alone can give a most faint knowledge of things by you unseen, but of a nature undying and most heavenly.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism*, p.476.

<sup>88</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *Result of an Experiment*, p.175.

This automatic script with its eulogy to the status of art in relation to the realms of spiritual enlightenment, and its hierarchic position over the "tottering steps of Science" reveals De Morgan's conviction that the transformation of the soul at death will not be an end, but the authenticated source of an enlightened status of the soul's development.

## Chapter Three

### Breaking the Code: De Morgan's Re-Vision of Christianity

#### 3.1 The Challenge to Orthodoxy

As I have shown, De Morgan's belief in spiritual evolution is evident in both her art and in the transcripts of *The Result of an Experiment*. Her concept of death as the herald of a new and eternal plane of existence, which is drawn from both Christian and pre-Christian traditions, becomes linked to an intensely personal system of correspondences between the natural and the supernatural, underpinned by the ideas of Plato and Swedenborg. Evolutionary theories, in a climate of scientific positivism, influenced and perhaps precipitated a radical revision by spiritualists of the assumptions of providential design, yet, as I have demonstrated, they could also be appropriated by spiritualists in support of an emphasis on cosmic order and progression. However, from De Morgan's paintings, and through her mediumship, it is clear that for her, belief could not be expressed by orthodox doctrines alone, including those of traditional Christianity. The combination of an interest in the feminine psyche and physical space, and an anti-materialist focus on the metamorphosis of the soul in her art, cuts through existing and established creeds. Her critique of organised religion, evident in the attempts at 'universal Truths' in her paintings, is outlined in several passages of *The Result of an Experiment*:

I see imposture everywhere. Christians impose on each other while their brains stagnate. The Mohammedan spends his time in sleepy formal prayers. The Spiritualist is mad for diabolism, and the Buddhist worships himself. All are deluded. You must work out your own salvation by doing the very best that lies in your path, trusting in the wisdom of divine power, and seeking in all

things the lesson of patience under trials, and faith in the ultimate good of an all-wise Divinity.<sup>1</sup>

This is very much in keeping with Swedenborg's theories of the universal nature of the soul<sup>2</sup>, and the idea of the individual's responsibility for spiritual improvement. Swedenborg argues that "in a universal sense, a soul is that from which another thing exists and lives. Thus the soul of the body is its spirit, for from this the body lives".<sup>3</sup> Like De Morgan, Swedenborg does not advocate individual religions, but sees God as an all-embracing, abstract divinity, who cannot be described without the imposition of man-made constraints, as "there is none good but the Lord only: and that there is no good, which is good itself, except from God".<sup>4</sup> In *The Result of an Experiment*, there are several more references to the false illusions fostered by religions, but Christianity is the most heavily criticised. The term 'creed-bound' occurs throughout the automatic writing transcripts, and refers to the atrophy of the soul after death due to erroneous belief. Spirit writers, guided by Angels, repeatedly tell of the stagnation of their souls after death, through fallacious belief, for example, one writes:

In your minds is doubt, and many teachings vary, and no one reaches the Truth. I am a missionary, and I taught the religion of Christ to heathens. I came here, and my disenchantment was terrible. I was honest and believed, but I had spread so much

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<sup>1</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.188.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Swedish philosopher, produced prolific writings on the nature of the spirit and of an afterlife attempt to articulate a community and system which is universal, which has no boundaries of creed or nationality. Discussion of all aspects of the afterlife refer only to the general, removing them from the boundaries of denominational faith. E. Swedenborg, *A Compendium of the Theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg*, S. Warren (ed.), New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> E. Swedenborg, *A Compendium of the Theological Writings*, p.541.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.687.



false doctrine ... I had taught regeneration by faith and the forgiveness of sins, the necessity of the Lord's Supper, and many ramifications of falsehood ... The doctrines of Christ were perverted and misunderstood, but in their purity they stood alone.<sup>5</sup>

Another passage emphasises the need to deny traditional teaching, where the spirits claim to be those of Christian martyrs, thrown to the Roman lions, yet their deaths did not result in eternal bliss:

We died the death of martyrs. We died to save our faith. We were slain by wild beasts in Rome, and our dying ears heard the yells of Devils as our spirits escaped from our mangled bodies. We rose and our faith was false [...] around us was matter, thick and intangible, but our spirits were creed-bound [...] sold for the empty doctrines of Christianity. [Finally an Angel tells them to disavow dogma, showing that] Truth is one, but the doors of approach are many. Love is all in all, and the spirit who would see God must cast aside the chains of dogma.<sup>6</sup>

This critique of organised religion can be seen as part of the reaction to science and evolutionary theories, in which, as John Addington Symonds argues in his *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* (1899), "the whole scheme of things is now regarded as a single organism, advancing methodically through stages of its growth in obedience to inevitable laws of self-expansion".<sup>7</sup> Moreover, contemporary writers argued that our understanding of abstract concepts such as martyrdom demonstrated an evolution of the soul which was not dependent

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<sup>5</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.186.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.158-9.

<sup>7</sup> J.A. Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, I, pp.6-7.

on the struggle for survival of the fittest, but rather showed a development of spiritual enlightenment. Wallace argues:

Thus alone we can understand the constancy of the martyr, the unselfishness of the philanthropist, the devotion of the patriot, the enthusiasm of the artist, and the resolute and persevering search of the scientific worker after nature's secrets. [This is evidence of] the workings within us of a higher nature which has not been developed by means of the struggle for material existence.<sup>8</sup>

Evolutionary theories, then, are seen to transcend limitations imposed by the boundaries of culture and creed, establishing the idea of a universal and organic progression of species. Writing in the same era as De Morgan's spiritualist experiments, and echoing De Morgan's utopian re-assessment of the effectiveness of traditional doctrine, Symonds maintains that distinct creeds are no longer relevant to late nineteenth-century society:

Evolution has reacted destructively on popular Christianity. By penetrating our minds with the conviction that all things are in process, that the whole universe is literally in perpetual *Becoming*, it has rendered it impossible for us to believe that any one creed or set of opinions possesses finality. Religions, like all things that are ours and human, have their day of declension: nor can Christianity form an exception to the universal rule.<sup>9</sup>

This idea of the universe 'becoming' is expressed and re-envisioned by De Morgan who draws on the nineteenth-century polarisation of masculine and

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<sup>8</sup>A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism*, p.474.

<sup>9</sup>J.A. Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, vol. I, p.7.

feminine gender attributes. In De Morgan's art, the bodies of women become metaphors for states of evolutionary transformation, on the threshold of 'being' in the sense of self-identity, but also in a more general attempt to show the universality of the life-giving female body and reproduction in its relation to the eternal nature of the cosmos. Contrary to much twentieth-century criticism of De Morgan's art as reactionary, this attempt to create and describe an ontology of the feminine is both subversive and defiant in relation to a male-dominated arena of expression and creativity. The literary and Symbolist complexities of her paintings synthesise both the general and the particular: in this way, contemporary critics and the public who attended exhibitions which included De Morgan's paintings would be familiar with both the style and draughtsmanship of her works, yet her paintings manifest oblique criticism of patriarchal dominance and institutionalised religion. Elise Smith argues that "the female protagonists in her work would stand [...] for all of humanity - an extrapolation of her own experience and philosophical stance to a larger humanist sphere".<sup>10</sup>

This strategy of simultaneously challenging patriarchal doctrine whilst remaining within the male-ordered world of artists is a key characteristic of De Morgan's art. It is central to De Morgan's attempt to re-present faith in an afterlife, and to explore potential and growth through individual choice. De Morgan's traditional background of regular church attendance<sup>11</sup> is transformed in the art she produced as an adult, into the expression of a belief in the existence of a deity, but one beyond the boundaries and constraints of a specific doctrine or cultural creed.

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<sup>10</sup> E. Lawton Smith, unpublished draft MS, *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body*, Chapter Four, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> P. Pickering's Diary, 1872, DMFA. This diary details regular Sunday visits to church undertaken by Evelyn and her father, Percival Pickering. Often her mother was unwell, and in these cases, Pickering and Evelyn would spend the time together.

### 3.2 The Allegory of the Cave: Plato re-visited

Throughout De Morgan's art, the inner-self, or the soul, is shown in dramatic binary oppositions, of hope and despair, darkness and light, bondage and freedom. By exploring these issues through the encoded female form, De Morgan's spiritualist-inspired art addresses the issues of religion and science from her own experience as a woman artist; and concerns with the division of the soul and the material body are balanced with an emphasis on their embodiment in a specifically female body and psyche. For De Morgan, matter and spirit become inseparable from literal (female) embodiment and emancipation. These ideas appear to be drawn primarily from the philosophical works of Plato and also to re-workings of Swedenborg's writings, expressed in the works of nineteenth-century writers, such as Walter Pater, William Howitt, and Sophia De Morgan. Although there was an expansion in interest in Platonism in general, many writers and intellectuals engaged directly with Plato's theories in the late nineteenth century. Walter Pater gave a series of lectures on the philosophical relevance of Plato to the nineteenth century, which were published in 1893: *Plato and Platonism, A Series of Lectures*. I shall suggest that De Morgan, like Pater, is concerned with direct intercourse with Plato's original works, rather than with a more general neo-Platonism. Pater points out the importance of this in his lectures; "by Platonism is meant not Neo-Platonism of any kind, but the leading principles of Plato's doctrine, which I have tried to see in close connexion with himself as he is presented in his own writings".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Preface, W. Pater, *Plato and Platonism. A Series of Lectures*, London: Macmillan, 1893.

As a woman whose circle included close friends of Pater, De Morgan would most certainly be familiar with Pater's ideas through his publications but also perhaps through personal acquaintance. Vernon Lee notes that after spending a day with Evelyn Pickering in Oxford, she went on to have tea with the Paters "yesterday, Evelyn Pickering came down to spend the day with us [...] Mary and I took her all round Oxford [...] This afternoon we go to dine with the Paters".<sup>13</sup> Such regular and informal exchanges enabled both women to participate in current topics of intellectual interest. The themes of Pater's publications including art, paganism, and Platonism have many correlations with De Morgan's work. Plato's central theme of spiritual blindness and enlightenment is explored through an analogy of imprisonment within a cave. To allegorise the theme of spiritual enlightenment, De Morgan draws upon Plato's parable of the cave to describe the ascent of the spirit from the illusions and shadows of this world, into the pure essence of being in the next. In *The Republic*, Book VII, Plato demonstrates the spiritual limitations of the majority of human-beings by making the analogy of seeing and understanding in the material world. Human beings will gradually comprehend the importance of the spirit, as it is revealed to those who will keep looking. The 'true' nature of ultimate spiritual understanding and emancipation is expressed by Plato, as by the nineteenth-century spiritualists, through the metaphor of light. Plato writes that unfettered sight would reveal "the sun itself, and [we can] gaze at it without using reflections in water or any other medium, but as it is itself".<sup>14</sup> As we will see, this emphasis on spiritual blindness/enlightenment is taken up by De Morgan in several of her works. Plato writes of an underground chamber, within which prisoners, as a result of physical bondage, can only see straight ahead. Behind them a fire burns, and in front of them is a wall on which unseen

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<sup>13</sup> V. Lee [Violet Paget], extract 19 July, 1881, *Vernon Lee's Letters* (ed.), I. Willis, London: Privately printed, 1937, p.80.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 516b (ed.), D. Lee, p.317.

operators project the shadows of images. To the prisoners, these shadows are reality, as they are unable to see the 'real' objects behind them. Plato describes the effects of this, when on first being taken into the daylight world, a prisoner would at first not believe the realities, and would "find it easier to look at shadows ... the thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun itself".<sup>15</sup> This creates a powerful metaphor of transition and growth, a progression through which the profound secret of being will be ultimately restored. This is an enduring theme in Western structures of thought, yet it is problematic, as Plato deals exclusively with the male, and, in his Theory of Forms, which underpins his work, the unchanging universals (the Idea, Truth, for example) also function to support the dominance of patriarchy. In this chapter I will assess the influence of Plato on De Morgan's art, and consider the ways in which she brings about a subversion and challenge to some of the more enduring ideas of spiritual advancement and the role of the female within that, in relation to the role of the female artist.

In the painting *The Captives* (n.d. late work) [Ill. 12], De Morgan combines a critique of moral and spiritual blindness with a provocative challenge to the philosophical and patriarchal assumptions of Platonist theories, and in particular, the myth, or allegory, of the cave. Greek philosophy, which underpins Western culture and belief, consistently effaces the feminine, yet in a painting such as *The Captives*, De Morgan utilises many of the ideas of Plato, but adapts them to express female alternatives. In Plato's *Republic*, for example, his argument for women to take part in male occupations is undercut by repeatedly remarking that "they are the weaker sex"<sup>16</sup> a view that De Morgan clearly does not subscribe to, in her preoccupation with vigorous, powerful women. Neither does Plato's dislike of art as a useful or valuable visual medium

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.318-9.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, Books V-VII.

affect De Morgan's tenacious passion for conveying her deep convictions. Plato suggests that the artist is a mere shadow-maker, remarking that:

The art of representation is ... a long way removed from truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, Plato's criticism of art aligns the effects of art to the shadows and illusions experienced by the prisoners in the cave: a belief which no longer has currency in the nineteenth century for British artists. Indeed, artist groups such as the Pre-Raphaelites and the German Nazarenes had foregrounded the role of art as a mediator of moral and spiritual expression, and the development of the Symbolist movement is underpinned by the concept of art as an expression of esoteric and profound principles. *The Captives* is one of De Morgan's most clearly Symbolist-influenced works, in that it moves away from narrative allegory, instead presenting an idea, or state of mind, through symbolic iconography.

In the automatic writings, there are a number of references to the importance of art as a link to spiritual development, such as in the lines "you are not to think that the only reason for doing Art is to make life beautiful. The reality it teaches is true as well as beautiful".<sup>18</sup> This concept is not restricted to spiritualist ideas, however, and Platonist ideas and beauty become the bases for discussions on contemporary art, as the essay "Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty", 1883, published in *Cornhill Magazine* demonstrates. This essay argues that there is an unconscious platonic relationship in Rossetti's work between beauty and morality:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.426.

<sup>18</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.78.

Love, as Plato said, is "the interpreter and mediator" between things human and divine; and it may be to love that we must look to teach the worshipper of beauty that the highest things are also the loveliest, and that the strongest of moral agencies is also the most pervading and keenest joy. Art and religion, which no compassion could amalgamate, may by love be expanded and interfused.<sup>19</sup>

For De Morgan, this suggestion that art and religion cannot be amalgamated is characteristically disputed in both her moralising allegories, and transcripts in *Result of an Experiment*. Contrary to the Platonist emphasis on art as a poor reflection of a more profound reality, De Morgan utilises art to literally express her vision of 'reality' and 'truth'. Plato's concern in the metaphysical, which contrasts sharply with Aristotlean materialist concepts, is strongly revived in nineteenth century spiritualist discourse. In the *Cornhill* essay on Rossetti, Myers discusses the symbolist elements of his work, in a description which could equally well apply to De Morgan's series of paintings exploring the development of the soul:

He is not a prophet but an artist; yet an artist who, both by the very intensity of his artistic vision, and by some inborn bent towards symbol and mysticism, stands on the side of those who see in material things a spiritual significance, and utters words of universal meaning from the fullness of his own heart.<sup>20</sup>

This connection between a resurgence of Platonic thought and scientific theory provides spiritualists with further rationalisation of the conjunction of religious

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<sup>19</sup> F. Myers, "Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty", *Cornhill Magazine*, July, 1883, p.223.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p217.



belief and scientific 'evidence'. The journal *Light* reprinted an account from the Newcastle *Daily Chronicle*, which argues:

Men who have deeply reflected on the origin of the universe and of life are comparatively few in number, and are spread over long periods of time [...] Thales, Anaximenes. Democritus, Lucretius, and Aristotle [taught] genetic theories. Plato and his disciples were dualistic, recognised supernatural causes, and had teleological theories [...] Since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, the monastic theory of the universe, that is, a universe of matter and organised living beings independently of a personally working Creator, has become general among evolutionists.<sup>21</sup>

For spiritualists, Plato's concerns with metaphysical and abstract philosophy were seen as evidence of the centrality of the spiritual which could be incorporated into an evolutionary model, rather than refuting it. Spiritualists continued to show interest in Plato, arguing that his allegory of the cave was a visual metaphor of the spiritual blindness evident in nineteenth-century society. An article dealing with the value of art as a vehicle for spiritualist discourse in *Light* emphasises the visual nature of Plato's allegory of the cave and its relevance to nineteenth-century spiritualism, which form the basis of De Morgan's interpretation in the painting *The Captives*:

Plato spoke of the screen which shut out from the sight of man the presence of the gods. The screen was but a pretty figure for the flesh, which veiled our being and separated us from the surrounding spirit-land, and if now we in the world of matter

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<sup>21</sup> T. Barkas, "Evolution, Agnosticism, and Spiritualism" quoted in *Light*, 31 May, 1884, p.222.

could not see the nearness of the faithful forms about us, what should we think if they from their side could not see the temporal and material, but simply the thoughts, the intentions, the spirit side of man, which could only claim the inheritance of eternity? How dwarfed to them would our humanity appear!<sup>22</sup>

De Morgan's painting *The Captives* encapsulates the claims of this writer; both the Platonic allegory of the cave, and the contemporary re-working of it through debate in the spiritualist press, provide the contextual framework in which to review De Morgan's painting as forming an integral part of the spiritualist doctrine. *The Captives* is described by Stirling as "a cave, hung with age-old stalactites, wherein are imprisoned female captives, clothed in rainbow tints, but terrorised by shadowy dragons, phantasms of their own creation".<sup>23</sup> This painting can be considered an allegory of reflections and duality. The cavern is a womb-like enclosure, penetrated by thrusting stalactites and stalagmites, and the women themselves echo this imagery, beset on all sides by the dragons and serpents, which in their transparency, concurrently occupy a space (as do the women) which is at the same time both internal and external. As the feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray points out:

It is obvious, even banal, that the cavern represents the womb: this is not a reflex, stereotypical Freudian reading - in the Platonic dialogues themselves Socrates is described as a midwife, his method as a maieutic method, and his role to assist the birth into knowledge of the truth.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> E.J. Baillie, "The Art of Life", in *Light*, November 3, 1888, p.543.

<sup>23</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.357.

<sup>24</sup> L. Irigaray, in *Re-Reading Irigaray* (ed.), M. Whitford, p.106.

It would appear that through a re-working of these established ideas, of developing the latent unconscious into consciousness (the light), De Morgan is merely imitating the tradition. However, on closer analysis, it becomes clear that there are no simple and closed readings to be found in this painting, and that the slippage between the conventional Platonic description of the cave, and De Morgan's feminised version, is charged with conflict.

To assess the impact De Morgan brings to Plato's allegory, a detailed look at some of the strategies De Morgan uses to subvert the accepted convention is very revealing. For example, the solidarity of the women through an almost over-determined modelling of anatomy and corporeal flesh, contrasts strikingly with the phantasmal beasts. This is emphasised by the rhythmic composition of bodies, linked harmoniously by the touch of hands. These are not weak, passive women, but strong, potent, athletic figures<sup>25</sup>, drawing strength against adversity from one another, yet the fluidity of relative movement in the group creates a sense of harmony and demarcates the physical boundaries of the women. The central standing figure, reminiscent of the archetypal protective pose of Piero della Francesca's altarpiece, *Madonna della Misericordia* (c.1462) [Ill.], and forming the pivotal horizontal and vertical dynamic axis which draws the viewer into this claustrophobic space, gazes out defiantly at the viewer, arms outstretched to protect the group of women below her. Oberhausen observes that this woman's expression shows her "awakened moral conscience [which] has restored her sight"<sup>26</sup> and indeed there are some parallels with William Holman Hunt's celebrated paintings, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) [Ill.]. In both paintings, the central figure is a woman who is standing, with a rapt expression of religious enlightenment dawning upon her

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<sup>25</sup> These figures reveal a debt to the prototype established by De Morgan's early choice of female model, Jane Hales, whose form dominates the type of female figure repeated in De Morgan's works.

<sup>26</sup> J. Oberhausen, "Evelyn De Morgan and Spiritualism", in (ed.), C. Gordon, *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.41.

face. However, Hunt's painting is concerned with reinforcing man-made morality and convention, whereas De Morgan's *The Captives* is concerned with the relation of women to wider humanist and spiritual concerns. Although Stirling makes no references to it, other contemporary sources show that Evelyn De Morgan was on close terms with artists such as Holman Hunt, Leighton, Rossetti, and Watts, and would therefore have had access to their paintings as well as discussions about them on a regular basis. Violet Paget observes that she spent time with De Morgan visiting the Leyland collection of Rossettis<sup>27</sup> and on one visit to De Morgan's studio "was a shaggy man in shirtsleeves, who discovered himself to be Holman Hunt".<sup>28</sup> Hunt's orthodox Christian views and De Morgan's spiritualist concerns may well have established a common interest between the two artists in the symbolic and allegorical representation of abstract metaphysical concepts.

Rather than individual women, these figures can be seen to represent what Elise Smith very appropriately terms "De Morgan's sense of community with other women".<sup>17</sup> Together they form a contiguous and organic whole, a visual representation of evolutionary theories. Colour dominates this relatively small painting: it is saturated with radiant hues of pinks and mauves, which, as discussed earlier, are symbolic of spiritual power and awareness. The resplendent tones which form vertiginous patterns of cave and bodies transform the canvas into a glowing realm of interiors, and it is in this introspection that De Morgan demonstrates the idea of captivity. The emphasis on constricting space, suggested by the stalactites which bear down on the women, effectively

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<sup>27</sup> V. Lee, *Veron Lee's Letters*, 11 July, 1883, p.126.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* The Veron Lee letters are an important source of information about De Morgan's circle and interests, revealing aspects and relationships of De Morgan which curiously, Stirling does not mention. It is clear from these letters that De Morgan occupied a central position in the art and intellectual circle of the late nineteenth century, more so than had previously been thought by scholars. This includes key Pre-Raphaelite artists, as well as women's rights activists, artists, and writers.

enclosing them, may also be a reference to the dichotomy of the public/private domain, in which (active) males participated in the public sphere, whilst females were perceived to belong to the private, or domestic (interior) sphere. As Cherry argues:

From the 1830s onwards, definitions of sexual difference were often managed through a polarity set up between private and public. When femininity was assigned to home and family, masculinity by contrast was apportioned the public world of city streets and urban institutions, administration, finance and paid productive labour.<sup>29</sup>

De Morgan's choice of subjects in art directly draws upon these divisions between the male and female sphere, through allegories of entrapment and imprisonment. De Morgan emphasises the confinement and limitations imposed upon women through marriage, in paintings such as *The Gilded Cage* (n.d. late work) [Ill.], and also in *The Prisoner* (1907-8) [Ill.]. In *The Captives*, the title itself signals the concept of imprisonment, and the stalactites and stalagmites can be read in this way as suggesting phallic symbolism, in the thrusting and rigid dimensions of rock which form a confining cage around the women, who, in contrast to the masculine properties of the rock, are expressed in terms of fluidity and motion.

A bondage which is both physical and spiritual, prevents these women from reaching the emancipation of enlightenment. The sinuous shapes of the transparent beasts are strangely beautiful, an effect heightened by their echo in the folds of the diaphanous robes of the women, and the contracting space, and even the relatively small size of this painting, (22¾ x 33 inches), creating an illusion of impending fracture - as if the canvas, the setting itself, is too small to

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<sup>29</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women*, p.121.

contain the dynamic female form. This, too, may be a comment on the sense of women 'becoming', and at the same time a reference to the possibility of spiritual and moral redemption, characterised by the expression and pose of the central figure. In this way, the symbolism of the cave signifying the impediment to spiritual development has overt references to Plato's cave. The choice of the cave is a particularly resonant image, as Cornford remarks:

The image [of a cave] was probably taken from mysteries held in caves or dark chambers representing the underworld, through which candidates for initiation were led to the revelation of sacred objects in a blaze of light. *The idea that the body is a prison-house, to which the soul is condemned for past misdeeds,* is attributed by Plato to the Orphics.<sup>30</sup> (My italics).

Seen in this way, De Morgan's use of a cave for the captive women has profound significance. It is at once the archetype of the degraded spirit, yet the sexual symbolism is insistent, with its focus on theme of the female body, through which De Morgan emphasises the distinguishing potential for reproduction. The female form then, stands for the epitome of a secret, sacred object, imbued with mysterious life-enhancing functions: a hallowed cavity into which male sexual anxieties project phallic penetration.

De Morgan draws attention to these dual conceptions by uniting the conspicuously sexual elements: the urgent repetition of the female form, with the philosophic desire to illustrate the passage from spiritual atrophy to enlightenment. These manifold expressions of hidden, sacred rituals have been primarily produced and reinforced by the male sex, as a way of both articulating and containing the alternate threat and potential of the unknown. The artist Paul Klee, who worked in Europe at the same time as De Morgan, uses this 'cave'

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<sup>30</sup> F.M. Cornford, *The Republic of Plato*, p.222.

metaphor to outline his vision of the purpose of art and the artist, whom he clearly regards as automatically a kind of universal male spirit:

Chosen are those artists who penetrate to the region of that secret place where primeval power nurtures all evolution ... who is the artist who would not dwell there? In the womb of nature, at the source of creation, where the secret key to all lies guarded ... then those curiosities become realities - realities of art which help to lift life out of its mediocrity. For not only do they, to some extent, add more spirit to the seen, but they also make secret visions visible.<sup>31</sup>

This passage would appear to invoke Platonic philosophy. It draws upon the powerful metaphor of the male colonisation of the womb-space, and triumph of making the invisible, visible. Klee does this by making the analogy between evolutionary theories, and seeing the female womb as the matrix of evolutionary and mysterious creative potential. These are concepts which are deeply embedded in Western thought, and are employed to articulate and perpetuate male rationalisations and understanding of the unknown - condensed into the exemplum of Otherness - the female. Irigaray's reading of Plato's allegory is striking here. Focusing on Plato's insistence on gendering thought, she emphasises that:

Of the two elements involved in reproduction, the seed of the Father (the Idea) and the womb of the Mother (the cavern itself), only the paternal element remains in the final scene ... for

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<sup>31</sup> P. Klee, "Lecture on Modern Art" 1924, quoted in M. Warner (ed.), *The Inner Eye: Art Beyond the Visible*, p.48.

Plato, the condition of ultimate Truth is the *absence* of any reflection: the [male] Idea is pure presence itself.<sup>32</sup>

Plato's allegory, therefore, has profound consequences for women, as, in the conclusion, the progenital male symbolised by metaphors or references to light, being, and presence, succeeds, but at the expense of the mother, because by this stage "the woman's genealogy has completely disappeared".<sup>33</sup>

The idea of the soul as having purely male qualities is an important theme taken up in Swedenborg's writings, whose theories and experiences of visions and heaven pervade Sophia De Morgan's books, which are clearly influenced by Plato. Swedenborg argues "by no wise man it is doubted that the soul is from the father [this is proved by] descendants which proceed in regular line from the fathers of families".<sup>34</sup> Like Plato, Swedenborg assumes that the ultimate plane of existence, the soul, is a male figure. He also suggests that after death, the spirit or soul remains housed in the physical body with all the senses intact, reminiscent of the Catholic Christian theme of the assumption of the Virgin. He refers explicitly to the soul in masculine terms, which suggests a universal notion of 'mankind': "for the life after death is a continuation of the life in the world [...] for there he appears entirely as a man, with all the members and organs in which man appears".<sup>35</sup> However, there is some doubt as to whether Swedenborg considers the female at all, other than in the maieutic terms borrowed from Plato, as he goes on to say: "for all the angels in heaven have the human form because the Lord is in that form, who often appeared as a man, after his resurrection".<sup>36</sup> By likening the soul to the male human body of Christ, and also to the overall creator, Swedenborg implicitly reaffirms the

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<sup>32</sup> L. Irigaray, *Re-Reading Irigaray* (ed.), M. Whitford, p.109.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>34</sup> Swedenborg, *A Compendium of the Theological Writings*, p.543.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



standard of masculinity in terms of Platonic spirituality, and helps to affirm the epistemology of Christian religious thought and structure in terms of gendered differentiation. Swedenborg's insistence on the patriarchal line of progenitors is a 'regular line' presumably unsullied by any possible influence of the maternal. He goes on to qualify this supposition by likening the soul to nature:

That the soul is from the father, and its clothing from the mother, may be illustrated by analogies in the vegetable kingdom. Here the earth or ground is the common mother; it receives into itself as in a womb and clothes the seeds; nay, it as it were conceives, bears, brings forth and nurtures, as a mother her offspring from the father.<sup>37</sup>

This provides an interesting link back to the allegory of the cave, and offers a stereotypical imitation of Plato's hypothesis. The inherent gender division, with its view of the female as a purely passive repository for male 'seed', whose chief function is to incubate, to nurture, to 'bring forth', pervades Western thought systems.

Yet, De Morgan, by using the very subject-matter which has been appropriated into a kind of legitimised male consciousness, is able to intervene in this male dominance, to question, to challenge, and to produce new meanings in her art through her engagement with the contemporary debates of spiritualism. Using Plato's cave as a starting point, De Morgan's allegory of light and entrapment is manifested through a double female perspective: that of both the artist/creator and of the object/subject, which goes some way to explaining, perhaps, the relevance of the internal/external patterning which dominates the painting.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

In one of the many commentaries on Plato's text, Antony Flew sums up the purpose of this allegory, and it has many significant parallels with De Morgan's *The Captives*:

[The allegory of the cave is] intended to illustrate the difficulties of moving from concern with the world of the sensible to a vision of the intelligible [...] on the one hand there are the corporeal, the visible, the sensible, the changing, the coming to be and passing away: while over against these on the other side there stand the invisible, the intelligible, the unchanging, the eternal without end and without beginning. The former is the illusion to the latter's reality, the shadow to its substance, the falseness to its truth; while to see only the former is really to be blind, to mistake unstable opinion for certain knowledge, to be dreaming yet thinking one is awake.<sup>38</sup>

In De Morgan's painting, the tensions between what is perceived to be real: entrapment, physical threat, lack of understanding, are balanced against the sense of hope in the central female character, who looks outwards with a gaze of rapt intensity, reminiscent of both Hunt's *Awakening Conscience* (1853), and Rossetti's portrayal of an ecstatic Elizabeth Siddal, in a trance-state in *Beata Beatrix* (1864-70). Despite being surrounded by the two principal dragons, whose gaping mouths are only inches from her head, she appears oblivious to any danger, her fixed gaze goes beyond the narrow confines of the canvas, as if detached from the shadows which assail her, seeing a vision of light and hope. The other women, with perhaps the exception of the figure second from the left, who begins to look upwards, symbolically cover their ears and eyes, and, like

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<sup>38</sup>A. Flew, *Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Sartre*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971, p.66.

the figures in *The Kingdom of Heaven* [Ill. 8], seem overwhelmed and defeated by their circumstances. In the automatic transcripts, there are many instances which outline this, as an Angel declares:

It is such a glorious life, and the many opening vistas are so beautiful, that one wishes to tell them of it; and then instead there is the gloomy veil of matter; sorrow and the dumb misery that blinds the sight and cramps the soul.<sup>39</sup>

These thematic concepts are developed in this painting: the woman on the far left, in an almost foetal position of despair, appears to caress the dragon which crouches at her side, and its recumbent, unthreatening pose mimics the slumped curves of her body, paradoxically affording them an air of tranquillity. The strange balance between what is intended to be beautiful (the women), and what should appear frightening (the dragons), is not so much that they are binary opposites: rather, they reveal formal and thematic parallels through the use of interchangeable elements of line, colour and patterning. These innovative explorations in De Morgan's art illustrate the tensions between hope and despair, and light and darkness. Like Plato, she explores ways of seeing, ways of distinguishing between false illusion and, as Flew puts it "the eternal without end and without beginning".

Underlying these Spiritualist ideas of the eternal soul and attainable goals, are assumptions about a fixed and unchanging set of absolutes, which have much in common with Plato's Theory of Forms. This maintains that beyond our limited knowledge formed by illusion and shadow exists "a world of permanent, unchanging and perfect entities which are unaffected by variations in

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<sup>39</sup>E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.16.

circumstances or conditions and comprise reality".<sup>40</sup> The metaphysical, for Plato as well as De Morgan, becomes the signifier for access to the 'real':

The familiar world, the world of particulars revealed to us through sense perception, [predominantly visual] was in various ways an unsatisfactory world, and that there was another permanent unchanging world, the world of Forms, which transcended, lay behind the familiar world and was superior to it in status - it was this latter world alone that was truly real, while the familiar world was only partly real.<sup>41</sup>

This is an *a priori* proposition, assuming that metaphysics, a system of thought which itself is bound up with ethics, ontology, epistemology and aesthetics, exists independently of experience. *A priori* forms a pivotal philosophical proposition which in itself is problematic: "a belief, proposition or argument is said to be *a priori* if its truth can be known independently of observation".<sup>42</sup> This was countered by the scientific emphasis of observational cause and effect in the nineteenth century, moreover, the platonic consequence of *a priori* assumptions fundamentally presupposes fixed notions of an 'absolute'.

For De Morgan, an acceptance of an eternal existence beyond the material world is a presupposition in her work, illuminating a common theme through all the paintings discussed so far in this chapter, but perhaps best expressed in the much larger painting *Realities* [Ill.] (1910-1914: 50¾ x 68¾ inches).<sup>43</sup> This is one of De Morgan's later works, demonstrating her continuing engagement with spiritualist concepts and the development of these into an anti-

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<sup>40</sup> Cross and Woosley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary*, London: Macmillan, 1970, p.184.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.176.

<sup>42</sup> D. Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy*, London and Toronto: Mayfield, 1994, pp.381-2.

<sup>43</sup> This painting was destroyed by a fire at Bourlet's, the storage contractors, in 1991, and only poor quality photographs (including one colour print) remain.

war stance. *Realities* appeared in an "Exhibition of Pictures Painted by Evelyn De Morgan, Exhibited for the Benefit of the British Red Cross and the Italian Croce Rossa"<sup>44</sup> in 1916, and its relevance as a war painting is central to its re-working of Platonic metaphor.

The First World War had a profound impact on both Evelyn and William De Morgan resulting in Evelyn De Morgan's earnest attempts to raise awareness of her moral antipathy to violence as a solution to world politics. It served to increase Evelyn's interest in spiritualism, and is thus reflected in her anti-war paintings. Stirling confirms this, observing:

One inevitable result of the two world wars was to accentuate enquiry into the evidence, or the reverse, of a continuation of consciousness beyond the grave [...] "Of course there is a future life!" exclaimed Evelyn vehemently one evening, "otherwise it would all be so meaningless!"<sup>45</sup>

In an tribute essay to William De Morgan in *Cornhill Magazine* 1917, the writer emphasises the effect the war had on the De Morgans:

Like many other authors, De Morgan found it impossible to go on writing when his whole soul was absorbed in the life and death struggle in which the Empire found itself involved. The new novel was left unfinished.<sup>46</sup>[...] During the next two years and a half, De Morgan thought of little but the war. He followed

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<sup>44</sup> C. Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.31.

<sup>45</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *The Merry Wives of Battersea and Gossip of Three Centuries*, London: Robert Hale, 1956, pp.170-177.

<sup>46</sup> This novel, *The Old Mad House*, was finished by Evelyn De Morgan after William's death in 1917.

every step of the campaign by land and sea, and did his utmost to enlighten public opinion abroad and in the United States.<sup>47</sup>

The deeply-held concern about the war was shared by the De Morgans, and expressed through Evelyn De Morgan's art, and exhibition/fund-raising activities. William De Morgan attempted to provide a scientific approach to resolve the technical conflicts generated by the war:

He devoted a great part of his time to making scientific experiments at the Polytechnic and perfecting new discoveries, which might prove useful in submarine warfare. All his old love for chemistry now revived, and many were the suggestions for saving life and destroying hostile craft which he sent to the Board of Admiralty.<sup>48</sup>

William De Morgan produced a series of scientific suggestions and inventions to aid the war effort, in an attempt to bring about a peaceful resolution.<sup>49</sup> As she had done since childhood, Evelyn De Morgan's reaction to the advent of war was to express her beliefs through a prolific output of paintings. *Realities* is not just an anti-war painting; rather, it is a consolidation of her earlier themes of spiritual blindness, and the aspiration of a transformed soul within the moralising anti-war message.

A series of cowering women occupy the lower plane of the picture, crouching or slumped on a barren rocky plateau. Close above them, hovering in

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<sup>47</sup> J. Cartwright, "William De Morgan: A Reminiscence", *Cornhill Magazine*, April, 1917, p.470.

<sup>48</sup> J. Cartwright, "William De Morgan: A Reminiscence", *Cornhill Magazine*, April, 1917, p.470.

<sup>49</sup> A proposal by William De Morgan, "A New Method of Inflation of the envelope of a Balloon or Zeppelin" (n.d.) DMFA. De Morgan suggests: "instead of inflating with hydrogen or coal-gas in bulk, to fill the envelope with an agglomerate of small gasbags. The effect of this will be to minimise the risk of destruction by a single shot."

oppressive assembly, are several dark winged creatures, and above these, are the radiant and joyful souls and angels soaring up towards the luminosity of the celestial plane. Unlike the women in *The Captives*, these besieged woman evince no indication of hope or salvation. Instead, their tortured and convoluted poses of bowed heads, outstretched arms and defensive gestures produces a *tableau* of despair. The compositional structure of a lower horizontal sphere, balances against the vertical format of the top half of the painting, making it curiously flat, but at the same time suggesting, as is De Morgan's concern, the transition from a prostrate position to an ascension which is uni-directional. The subject-matter of this painting is another allegory of spiritual enlightenment, and also a comment on the metaphysical impoverishment of the contemporary material world. Again, this reflects many of the discussions of reality inspired by Platonist and Swedenborgian thought, and is manifested in the automatic writings, where an Angel says:

I am sent to say that our world is the real world, our thought the real thoughts, and our work the real work. You are in a land of shadows and your days are spent in probation, but your attitude of mind depends on the fruit you reap ... earth life is dull, cold, grey and the spirit is cramped in the prison of clay, but outside the sun of the spirit-spheres shines, and the glory and light of Heaven is a great reality.<sup>50</sup>

This division of the bleakness of the mortal world in contrast to the afterlife is fundamentally an allegory of vision or lack of vision. De Morgan's use of light and the sun as a divine entity is a convention used throughout most civilisations. In the use of the Sun as a simile it has been demonstrated that Plato equates light with comprehension:

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<sup>50</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.59.

[Plato] proceeds to differentiate the sense of sight from the other senses on the ground, [so that] if the eye is to see, and the object is to be visible. a third thing is required, namely light, and the source of this light is the Sun. Thus the sun through its light enables the eye to see and the object to be seen.<sup>51</sup>

*Realities* emphasises this distinction between light and dark, of an independent actuality, and also, employs the Platonic emphasis of an actuality independent of our limited conceptions of the world. For De Morgan, this vision of a supreme plane of existence, and a deep and profound absolute 'reality' can be seen as an attempt to rationalise and explain the complexities of life. Whether the themes explored in this painting resolve the obstacles set up for the viewer is uncertain - the violent division between those spirits who have reached salvation, and those who remain in a kind of purgatory, is not bridged in this depiction. This can be considered a direct response to the social and historical context in which the painting was conceived, revealing the disillusionment, horror and upheaval felt by the British public at the onset of the Great War.

The title of the painting has at least two possible interpretations: the realities of the material world, or the reality of the soul/spirit life. Stirling argues that Evelyn intended the latter interpretation, and she quotes from a discussion between Evelyn and a friend who were considering this painting:

'I suppose,' said a visitor one day, 'these' - pointing to the angelic vision - 'are the Dreams; and the lower figures - the sadness, the sordidness, and the misery clothed in beauty which is a mockery - *those* are the 'Realities of Life?' ' I see differently,' said Evelyn De Morgan ... and in a little notebook De Morgan likewise

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<sup>51</sup>Cross and Woosley, *Plato's Republic*, p.202.



pencilled this sentence: 'The things we count real are dreams,  
and the realities are all a-head.'<sup>52</sup>

This reading reinforces the importance De Morgan attaches to the Platonic metaphors of the Ideal and Absolute, as the title of this painting indicates. In a society threatened by violence and war, De Morgan re-works familiar spiritualist themes with urgent contemporary significance, painting allegories such as *Realities* which reinforce the platonic concept of a 'Real' plane of existence to which we are morally and spiritually blind. These concepts become increasingly important in De Morgan's later works, as she responds to the volatile situation of war in Europe, and attempts to reconcile this with her spiritualist beliefs. By the end of the nineteenth century, spiritualist concepts underpinned by Swedenborg and Plato are invoked as an alternative to orthodox Christianity in De Morgan's works up until the outbreak of the First World War. *Realities* was one of thirteen paintings De Morgan specifically chose to exhibit in order to raise consciousness and funds for the British Red Cross in the War effort in the Red Cross Benefit Exhibition, Edith Grove Chelsea, in 1916.<sup>53</sup>

De Morgan was both an ideologically and politically active artist, who was committed, through the medium of painting, to propose her pacifist stance, and at the same time raise money to support injured soldiers. This was noted at the time, as the writer in *Cornhill Magazine*, 1917, observes of William De Morgan:

He took keen interest in an exhibition of his wife's symbolical  
paintings dealing with subjects suggested by the war, which was

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<sup>52</sup>A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.357.

<sup>53</sup> The paintings lent by De Morgan to the Edith Grove Exhibition were: *The Red Cross, 1914, Our Lady of Peace, Realities, The Poor Man Who Saved the City, The Marriage of St Francis and Holy Poverty, The Field of the Slain, The Search Light, In Memoriam, A Soul in Hell, Victoria Dolorosa, S.O.S., An Angel Piping to the Souls in Hell.*

held in Chelsea last spring, and was very proud of the substantial sum which it realised for the English and Italian Red Cross Societies.<sup>54</sup>

This was the last exhibition of De Morgan's work shown in her lifetime. However, De Morgan's efforts to alleviate the suffering and inhumanity of war are outlined in the terms of her will. This states that:

I direct my executors to sell the same and all such of my pictures (not hereby otherwise disposed of) busts and drawings as are suitable to be sold which shall be found in my studios and house at the date of my death at Messers Christie Manson and Woods at such time [...] as my executors consider most advantageous to my estate and to stand possessed of the proceeds of such sale upon trust for the St. Dunstan's Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors, St. Dunstan's Lodge, Regents Park or for such other Home or Institutions having for its objects the benefit and welfare of the blind.<sup>55</sup>

Despite De Morgan's clear instructions that the vast majority of her large collection of oils, busts and drawings should be sold for the benefit of soldiers, these wishes were not fully carried out due to a family dispute.<sup>56</sup> It is perhaps

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<sup>54</sup> J. Cartwright, "William De Morgan: A Reminiscence", *Cornhill Magazine*, April, 1917, pp.470-71.

<sup>55</sup> Will of Mary Evelyn De Morgan, probated 23 June, 1919, p.2. DMFA.

<sup>56</sup> The De Morgan Foundation archive houses a series of acrimonious letters between A.M.W. Stirling, and Spencer Pickering, the eldest brother, disputing ownership of the paintings. Stirling eventually bought the whole set of paintings from St Dunstan's for a nominal sum, to inaugurate the De Morgan Foundation collection, as a way to avoid Spencer Pickering selling, or loaning any of his sister's works separately. This clearly goes against Evelyn De Morgan's wishes, and the antipathy between Spencer Pickering and Stirling is not resolved. It should be noted, however, that in diary and letter references, Evelyn De Morgan clearly had a close and affectionate relationship with her brother Spencer, with

ironic then, that despite her deeply-held Platonic idealism, De Morgan's work should end up the source of financial and ownership disputes after her death.

### 3.3 Mystics and Martyrs: De Morgan's Appropriation of Christian Iconography

De Morgan's appropriation of Christian iconography shows the development of key and recurring themes in her works. If, in the nineteenth century, the occult was conceived primarily through spiritualist practices, open to the accusation of witchcraft and diabolism, which will be discussed in the following chapter, then figures of saints, mystics and martyrs also symbolised esoteric knowledge, and mystical practices which were applied often in direct opposition to mainstream cultural ideas. It becomes apparent in De Morgan's work that the boundary between 'good' and 'evil,' magical and esoteric aims are often transgressed, reflecting the debates in the spiritualist press about the conflation of witches, saints and martyrs. In an article entitled "Witches and Mediums" published in *Light*, the writer argues that there is a close correspondence between those who have been accused of witchcraft, Christian martyrs, and nineteenth-century mediums:

If we no longer look for the cause of witchcraft among devils and evil spirits, human nature must itself be regarded as the source of mystic faculties [...] In the Middle Ages magic was shared between God and the devil as two distinct sources whence mystic forces proceeded, but it may be proved by

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whom she was close in age. Stirling and Evelyn De Morgan, on the other hand, had very little contact as adults, and Stirling was not even invited to attend the De Morgan marriage.

drawing an instructive parallel that the source of white and black magic does not differ, but in both cases is found to be in human nature [...] therefore I will neither exalt the saints nor abase the witches.<sup>57</sup>

De Morgan's re-presentation of Christian and also pagan concepts through spiritualist principles produces an inclusive and positive philosophy for both (female) witches and saints/martyrs, which simultaneously posits a critique of the discourses of patriarchy. The appropriation of martyr figures for an exploration of gender and spiritual roles is striking in De Morgan's work, yet not surprising, as the source material offers a variety of potential meanings:

The early Christian martyrs and the thirteenth-and fourteenth-century women who had dedicated their lives to the care of others, to good works and to prayer - present contradictory traits. They are often women who chose to live their lives following their own vocation, and finding their own role in contemporary society, often outside of marriage and of family life.<sup>58</sup>

De Morgan may have found in this subject a particular personal appeal. Stirling documents that from a young age, De Morgan resisted the social expectations for a woman of her class, and on her mother's suggestion that she be presented to the Queen as a debutante, retorted; "I'll go to the Drawing Room if you like, but if I go, I'll kick the Queen!"<sup>59</sup> It would also seem that De Morgan was opposed to the idea of marriage, relishing her freedom and independence as a single woman against the social dictates of the time, and Stirling points out the

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<sup>57</sup> C. du Prel, "Witches and Mediums" in *Light*, 28 August, 1886, p.393.

<sup>58</sup> P. Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art. Gender, Representation and Identity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, p.164.

<sup>59</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.180.

surprise and shock of the Pickering family when De Morgan announced her intention to marry William De Morgan, aged 32:

When, therefore, a letter from Evelyn arrived abruptly announcing that she was engaged to be married, and was intending to bring her fiancé to dinner on the following Sunday [...] the intelligence was received with the incredulity it seemed to court. Here, obviously was another jest - this time too far-fetched for credence! - Evelyn, whose sole romance was her art - Evelyn to have fallen in love, to be engaged - to be about to be married like any other ordinary mortal - the absurdity of the suggestion was manifest.<sup>60</sup>

After the wedding in March, 1887, Evelyn De Morgan ensured her continuing independence as a professional artist within her marriage, which, as Deborah Cherry points out, is an unusual position for nineteenth-century women artists, the majority of whom gave up painting after marriage. A few women, like De Morgan, married other artists, and continued to paint. These include Joanna Boyce, Henrietta Ward, Jane Bowkett, Laura Alma-Tadema, Sophie Anderson and Marianne Stokes.<sup>61</sup>

The evocation of the female martyr/saint in De Morgan's work has a particular relevance to women artists, struggling against prejudice and hostility, particularly from their male contemporaries. Martyrs could be appropriated to demonstrate not just a moral message, but also a political subtext:

It seems, however, that these mirrors of chastity and virtue offered to them [women] not only models of renunciation, passivity and obedience, but also models of active life. Religion

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.194.

<sup>61</sup> D. Cherry, *Painting Women*, p.33.

has been seen by some modern historians as a major factor in the oppression of women, unquestionably fostering submissive behaviour through the use of sacred images as *exempla* [but] symbols and *exempla* are not simple repositories of a single one-dimensional meaning, and their power lies also in the multiplicity of interpretations which can be extracted from them.<sup>62</sup>

It is in these complex interpretations of existing legends that De Morgan creates personal spiritual and feminist meanings. Early paintings of martyrs include *St. Catherine of Alexandria* (1873/5)<sup>63</sup> [Ill.11], and *The Christian Martyr* (1882) [Ill.3], which demonstrate De Morgan's interest in the female form as an emancipatory and empowering force, as well as highlighting the relative values of material existence and spiritual enlightenment. The lives and portrayals of the saints gained popular currency amongst Victorian artists, made familiar by the writings of the feminist art historian Anna Jameson, in her series of books: *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848-64).<sup>64</sup> These detail both the narratives of the saints and martyrs in Christian gospel and apocryphal sources, and are accompanied by Jameson's sketches which reproduce Renaissance versions of the narratives. Oberhausen has noted a strong correlation between the iconographic detail included in De Morgan's martyrs and saints, and Jameson's writings, arguing that the two women share an interest in Christian hagiology, philanthropy and social activism. Indeed, Jameson's books were well-

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<sup>62</sup> P. Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, p.164.

<sup>63</sup> Destroyed by fire in 1991. The date on this painting is not verified, but Gordon puts it either as 1873 or 1875. However, the strong influence of Leonardo da Vinci's *St Catherine of Alexandria* suggests that the later date, 1875, is the correct one, after De Morgan's first unchaperoned visit to Italy to study the Old Masters.

<sup>64</sup> This is made up of four parts: *The Poetry of Sacred and Legendary Art*, 1848, *Legends of the Monastic Orders, as represented in the Fine Arts*, 1850, *Legends of the Madonna, as represented in the Fine Arts*, 1852, and *The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art*, 1864.

used reference books for other Pre-Raphaelite artists, and the extent of their influence widespread. Both Burne-Jones and Rossetti drew upon Jameson's ideas, as Burne-Jones recalls:

Damn Ruebens! (*sic*) Or, in the words of Rossetti as they occur in his copy of Mrs Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art* wherever the name of Ruebens turns up - 'Spit here.' It was one of the things that I saw in my early days with Rossetti - when I took up the book which was lying about in his painting room.<sup>65</sup>

From early on in her career, De Morgan paints well-known saints and martyr figures, with identifiable attributes. By the 1880s and onwards, the martyr or saint becomes a metaphor of spiritual enlightenment and courage with a concomitant increased use of allegory and symbolism, which masks the specificity of identity and deeds of known martyrs and saints in favour of more comprehensive allusions to moral and social reform. Moreover, the significance of the martyr figure as an entity of resurrection and fortitude in De Morgan's work becomes more generalised, particularly in the context of the anti-war works. These represent De Morgan's interest in finding a universal symbolism of pacifism and spiritual moralising which can be successfully conveyed through pictorial strategies, such as allegory, and also through perpetuating contemporary spiritualist themes.

One of De Morgan's early, explicitly Christian-influenced martyrs is *St. Catherine of Alexandria*. Images of St. Catherine, made popular by the apocryphal tales in *The Golden Legend* (c.1265) by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century and discussed in Jameson's writings and in general through those intellectuals interested in the High Church revival, were prevalent from the

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<sup>65</sup>E. Burne-Jones, *Burne-Jones Talking: his Conversations 1895-1898, preserved by his studio assistant Thomas Rooke*, M. Lago (ed.), London: John Murray, 1982, p.148.

1840s onwards. Indeed Jameson's intentions for her writings is relevant to De Morgan's purpose in art:

I endeavoured to show that these [scriptural figures] have, and ought to have, for us, a deep, a lasting, a universal interest [...] still consecrated through its original purpose, and through its relation to what we hold to be most sacred, most venerable, most beautiful, and most gracious, on earth or in heaven.<sup>66</sup>

De Morgan's version of the virgin martyr, St. Catherine of Alexandria, is modelled on the robust form of Jane Hales, and appears to draw upon the specific iconography, described in detail by the writings of de Voragine and later by Jameson. The composition is a large, full-length single figure of the saint, reading out loud from a book held in her right hand and leaning on the instrument of her torture, the wheel, with her left.<sup>67</sup> Stirling describes this painting in a guide-book to the De Morgan Foundation Collection at Old Battersea House:

Beside St. Catherine is the wheel, indicative of the fashion in which she suffered martyrdom, and on her face may be read the dual emotion which is mastering her - a realisation of the beauty

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<sup>66</sup> A. Jameson, *Legends of the Monastic Orders*, London: Longman and Brown, 1850, p.xvii.

<sup>67</sup>It is very likely that De Morgan has painted a ring on the wedding-finger of the left-hand of the figure in this painting, because of the prominent position of this hand in the composition. However, as the original painting was destroyed, I have been working from a poor-quality black-and-white photograph, and it is not possible to verify the inclusion of the ring. The ring is significant, as it signifies the mystic union of Christ and St Catherine, in turn emphasising the allegorical importance of the union of souls, rather than worldly concerns. This provides two themes which recur in De Morgan's work: women who are subject to visions and trance-states, and also the division between the spiritual and corporeal world.



of the spiritual teaching which she is absorbing, and a pitiful horror of the fate in store for her.<sup>68</sup>

This account indicates that De Morgan's version is a re-working of the familiar portrayals of the life and attributes of Catherine of Alexandria. In *The Golden Legend*, a long narrative describes the life and events of Catherine's martyrdom. Catherine represents both an ideal of womanhood; chaste, humble, intensely devoted to Christ, yet at the same time is chiefly acknowledged, as Voragine emphasises, for her intellectual faculty, particularly with regard to Platonic philosophy. Her trials at the hands of a heathen emperor are met with courage and religious conviction, making her a model of fortitude. De Voragine declares that:

It is worthy of note that blessed Catherine is admirable in five respects: first in wisdom, second in eloquence, third in constancy, fourth in the cleanness of chastity, fifth in her privileged dignity.<sup>69</sup>

It is striking that the most important virtue attributed to Catherine is that of wisdom, stressing the value of women and intellectual endeavour. De Morgan's painting emphasises this idea, by showing St. Catherine reading from her book. According to Jameson "she holds the book as significant of her learning"<sup>70</sup> and "the works of Plato were her favourite study"<sup>71</sup> providing for De Morgan an

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<sup>68</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *Old Battersea House and the De Morgan Collection of Pictures and Pottery (to which are added a few pictures by Roddam Spencer-Stanhope and Other Pre-Raphaelite Artists)*, London: H. Rowling, undated, p.14.

<sup>69</sup> J. de Voragine, "St Catherine of Alexandria" in *The Golden Legend, Readings of the Saints*, vol. II (trans. W. Ryan), New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, p.339.

<sup>70</sup> A. Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol. II, London: Longman and Brown, 1848, p.88.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

attractive paradigm of Platonic philosophy and intellectual and spiritual endeavour. However, despite the ostensible underpinning of Christian doctrine displayed by the choice of the story of St. Catherine, Jameson's text reveals a dramatic and contrary alternative reading to the Christian account, which has strong connections with De Morgan's heterodox religious views. After paraphrasing de Voragine's account from *The Golden Legend*, Jameson adds:

But it is a curious fact connected with the history of St. Catherine, that the real martyr, the only one of whom there is any certain record, *was not a Christian, but a Heathen; and that her oppressors were not Pagan tyrants, but Christian fanatics.*<sup>72</sup> (My italics).

As Oberhausen has convincingly demonstrated, through the connection between Sophia De Morgan and Jameson, Evelyn De Morgan would have been familiar with Jameson's books as reference sources for her works, and would, therefore, have had a detailed knowledge of these salient points, including this indictment of Christian zealots. This challenging version of the martyrdom of St. Catherine at the hands of Christians, rather than Pagans, could not have passed unnoticed by De Morgan. It is therefore my contention that De Morgan chose St. Catherine as a model because of the general themes of humanist striving which she represents, rather than, as has been previously considered, an example of De Morgan's austere, but unproblematic Christian works.<sup>73</sup> As I

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>73</sup> P. Yates's essay "Evelyn De Morgan's use of literary sources in her paintings" in C. Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, pp.53-75, posits an unproblematic link between De Morgan's paintings which incorporate traditional biblical iconography and the overt narrative function of the scriptural sources. However, this does not account for De Morgan's spiritualist beliefs, and perhaps more importantly, for De Morgan's striking, sometimes indeterminate and unusual re-working of themes. Yates herself expresses the difficulty encountered with providing clear-cut interpretations for these often complex works.

have demonstrated, De Morgan's works are consciously motivated by the intellectual concerns of late nineteenth-century life, and to see her presentation of biblical or religious themes simply in terms of working through existing artistic conventions is schematic, and is not sustained by the evidence of both her written documentation, and the prolific output of allegorical works. As the Platonist emphasis in the scripts from *Result of an Experiment* shows, De Morgan's abhorrence of organised creeds is met equally with a desire for a new artistic language which is all-encompassing and beyond divisive doctrines: "I can only tell you this much - Creeds are many and false. Truth is single and unchanging. It is deep in the hearts of all who earnestly and with great patience and humility seek it."<sup>74</sup>

The painting of St. Catherine then, can be seen as an exploration of De Morgan's early theological deliberations rather than as an unmediated response to existing ideas incorporated in Jameson's texts. It is also relevant to consider the response to this painting in the public arena. It was exhibited at the Dudley Gallery in 1876, where surprise was expressed that it was the work of a woman artist:

There is no other example of this grave and earnest attention to detail to be noticed in the contributions unless we may point to the figure of 'St Catherine of Alexandria' by an artist named Evelyn Pickering, who it is surprising for more reasons than one to find is a lady. This picture, although rather put in a corner, will not fail to assert its merits as an exceedingly well-posed, richly-coloured, and above all expressive figure.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.75.

<sup>75</sup> Review quoted in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.15.

It is ironic that De Morgan's work, when considered successful, is almost always compared with male artists, and yet these perceived 'masculine' elements also signal her determination to produce art of a professional standard, which meant succeeding according to existing nineteenth-century male criteria. However, despite the critic's surprise that the author of this painting is a woman, the choice of subject-matter, and the way in which De Morgan presents it, reveals De Morgan's interest in depicting a specifically female pantheon of goddesses and mystics.

The significance of martyrs and saints as recurring subjects in De Morgan's paintings can be linked to her interest in all occult matters, and the female martyr figure, with her mystic visions and trances, had a close correlation between the converse concept of witchcraft, and powerful resonance with nineteenth-century spiritualist mediums, who were accused, like both witches and martyrs, of diabolism. The dual nature of mystics/martyrs is explored in De Morgan's painting *The Christian Martyr* (1882). Yates suggests this painting follows Millais's subject, *The Solway Martyr* (1871)<sup>76</sup>:

It must portray the story, then current, of Margaret of Wigtownshire, (1667-85) a Covenanter who was sentenced to be drowned in the Solway for refusing to acknowledge the Episcopancy and King James II as head of the Church of Scotland. She was a popular figure of martyrdom, and the magazine *Once a Week* had published her story in 1862 with an illustration by Millais.<sup>77</sup>

There are parallels between the two paintings; both are single-figure studies of a woman bound to a stake on a beach, with the tide drawing in. However, in

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<sup>76</sup> Millais painted at least three versions of this story, in 1862, 1863, and 1871.

<sup>77</sup> P. Yates, "Evelyn De Morgan's use of literary sources in her paintings" in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.55.

terms of composition and execution, there are many differences. Millais's painting shows a three-quarter length portrait of a young woman, painted close to the surface of the canvas so that the viewer directly engages with the very physicality of the woman's presence, her bodice thrusting outwards and bursting open, her waist emphasised by the chains around it, and the loose hair falling in waves across her shoulders. Her expression, with the downcast gaze, appears to be one of coy sexuality, rather than religious stoicism. In short, Millais's representation has a close correspondence with what Auslander Munich describes as "Poetics of Rescue/Politics of Bondage,"<sup>78</sup> emphasised by the painterly handling of flesh and textiles, and the sensual aesthetic pleasure generated by the richness of hair colour, which draws attention to the undeniable sexual allure of the glossy parted lips of the doomed woman.

De Morgan, on the other hand, presents a red-robed woman who is painted full-length, and occupies the middle-distance of the canvas, incorporating her into a marine and beach landscape, the careful delineation and attention to which suggests the concept of resurrection, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five. In bestowing the martyr with red robes, De Morgan is again significantly aligning the figure to Messianic status, as discussed in Chapter Two. Her pose is reminiscent of Renaissance Madonna figures, with the tilted head and oblique gaze; thus elevating the martyr to the position of a specifically female goddess. Her hands are cuffed and chained to a large wooden post behind her, and above her head the inscription NAZAREA appears. The meaning of this word has remained obscure until very recently, when my research into spiritualist literature reveals that the word refers to eastern religious sources, specifically to groups of women mystics and healers,

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<sup>78</sup>A. Auslander Munich, *Andromeda's Chains. Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. See chapter one: "Poetics of Rescue, the Politics of Bondage", pp.8-38.

and meaning "seer" or "mystical healer".<sup>79</sup> This painting then, although ostensibly a re-working of a popular story, draws on De Morgan's spiritualist interests, and becomes an interpolation of spiritualist doctrine and De Morgan's claim for an alternative female representation of religious, spiritual, and moral ascendancy. This transfiguration of the Divine into a feminine paradigm is used by De Morgan as a tool of female empowerment; illustrating women as suffering, yet succeeding in the fulfilment of their beliefs and status despite hostility and prejudice. *The Christian Martyr* can be read in three important ways. First, it can be seen in terms of a general recuperation of the role of women campaigning for deeply held beliefs and principles, directly related to the activities of the suffragettes in the late nineteenth century. Second, the reference to NAZAREA and the story of a female mystic/martyr is particularly appropriate to demonstrate the spiritualist affinity with martyrs, witches and contemporary medium practices, relating specifically to women as seers and healers. Finally, it can be understood by the way it has been exhibited, both in the nineteenth century and very recently. It was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery, in 1882, where it provoked the comment:

This is Miss Eveleen [*sic*] Pickering's "Christian Martyr"; a girl tied to a stake to drown with the rising tide [...] This young lady in her red drapery is less like a living, breathing being, than one of Cimabue's virgins; she is pure with the purity of an ascetic, and we cannot help feeling that her proper place would be in the stained-glass window of some chapel dedicated to "Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows".<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> A.P. Sinnett, *The Occult World*, London: Trubner, 1883, pp.112-3.

<sup>80</sup> *The Spectator*, 24 June, 1882, p.830.

The disapproval of *The Spectator* for a female artist attempting a serious subject echoes the critics and artists who demand that male and female artists should remain within separate spheres:

It is always foolish to imply that the art of women should resemble the art of men. Each should be distinct with the charm of sex, each should be the compliment of the other. But in our own time, somehow, most of the women-artists have tried their best to be masculine, while not a few of the men have turned out effeminate work. It may be useless to protest, but this kind of work is sterile, it has no future; the world soon wearies of it, and turns with joy to those men who put manhood into all their pictures or statues, and to those women whose art is charmed with their own natures.<sup>81</sup>

That De Morgan's *Christian Martyr* was received with hostility suggests that it appears threatening purely on the grounds of female authorship, yet the criticism is not borne out by the selectors at the Grosvenor Gallery, who chose to place it in the West Gallery, "the Grosvenor's principal and most prestigious exhibition space".<sup>82</sup> This painting was also exhibited at the South London Art Gallery, which had close bonds with the artists who frequented the Grosvenor Gallery, including Burne-Jones, Walter Crane, Evelyn De Morgan, Louise Jopling and Clara Montalba. De Morgan not only loaned paintings to exhibitions at the public South London Art Gallery, she later gave her works, too, demonstrating

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<sup>81</sup> *The Studio*, XX, 1900, p.138.

<sup>82</sup> C. Newall, *The Grosvenor Gallery Exhibitions. Change and Continuity in the Victorian Art World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.11. Almost half of the twenty paintings and sculptures exhibited by De Morgan at the Grosvenor Gallery were shown in the West Gallery.

her commitment to public acts of political endeavour, for causes in which she believed.<sup>83</sup>

This same criticism occurs more than one hundred years later, when the same painting appears in an exhibition at the Dulwich Art Gallery (formerly the South London Art Gallery) which resurrected some of the key paintings exhibited for public edification in the late nineteenth century. *Art for the People* (1994) included De Morgan's *The Christian Martyr*, tiles by William De Morgan, and works by Leighton, Ruskin, Crane and Ford Madox Brown. *The Observer* critic declares that "'Art for the People' is to do with art parochially deployed, art as a ray of enlightenment aimed from on high at the inhabitants of late nineteenth-century slums".<sup>84</sup> Whilst referring to De Morgan's *The Christian Martyr*, which appears to indicate the importance of this painting in the exhibition, the critic simultaneously dismisses it; "Evelyn De Morgan's 'A Christian Martyr' wilts in the style of Botticelli".<sup>85</sup> Timothy Hilton, however, in *The Independent on Sunday*, goes further:

At the same time there's a stress on individual sacrifice as much as endeavour - nowhere more so than in Evelyn De Morgan's "The Christian Martyr". Watts called her 'the first woman artist of the day', but we cannot see that De Morgan was either abundantly talented or a leader.<sup>86</sup>

The problem that nineteenth-century critics, as well as more recent ones, seem to have with De Morgan's work in general, and this painting in particular, is that

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<sup>83</sup>G. Waterfield, *Art for the People. Culture in the Slums of Late Victorian Britain*, London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1994, p.51.

<sup>84</sup>W. Feaver, *The Observer*, 1 May, 1994, p.14.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> T. Hilton, "By the People, for the People" *The Independent on Sunday*, "The Sunday Review" 1 May, 1994, p.26.



it does not conform to the stereotype of 'women's art'. Hilton confirms this when he adds;

Evelyn De Morgan was fatally trapped by the twin influences of Botticelli and Burne-Jones. Her martyr, delicately chained and with one naked breast displayed, might be the artist herself. Or the picture might have been painted by a man. Useless to look for painting of the first class in this exhibition.<sup>87</sup>

Hilton seems to be unaware of the inherent, and revealing, contradictions in his statement - that De Morgan may be producing a self-portrait, or a self-identification, in the representation of a martyred woman, yet in the same sentence, Hilton suggests that De Morgan's work is like a man. What does he mean by this? The paradoxical assertion that De Morgan's work is somehow 'masculine' underlines an important aspect of the reception of works by women artists. Hilton's assumptions clearly suggest that as a woman artist, De Morgan should have painted in a recognisably 'feminine' style, presumably, along with the critics of one hundred years ago, limited to painting flowers and scenes of domestic harmony. It is De Morgan's ability to compete at the same level of professionalism as her male contemporaries which appears to generate such a hostile and deeply prejudiced view of her work. Clearly, some critics who first saw De Morgan's painting at the Grosvenor Gallery, and similarly at the recent Dulwich Gallery exhibition, found the painting threatening in the seeming 'contradiction' invoked by her technical skill (which makes her style like a man?) and her feminist/spiritual subject-matter. In the case of martyrs, saints and mystics, however, these very contradictions, of worldly, or material expectations, of social limitations, and of the male fear of the occult power perceived to be inherent in the female sex, define their activities.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

De Morgan painted *St. Christina, Giving her Father's jewels to the Poor*, as late as 1904, illustrating both the spiritual resolution of the young woman, as well as a contemporary message on anti-materialism. She also continued the redemptive theme of rebellious martyred women through allegorical paintings, such as *The Thorny Path* (1887) which shows the single figure of a woman who disavows the life of wealth of her father, a King, and chose to travel her own journey to spiritual enlightenment. Although only black and white photographs of this painting remain, Stirling notes that the woman is "clad in a lovely yellow robe with wonderful jewels."<sup>88</sup> The use of yellow, signifying faith, the sun and initiation, according to Anna Jameson,<sup>89</sup> are striking in De Morgan's work as a common theme. If, in *The Thorny Path*, the yellow robes are deployed to communicate the moral purity, or at least, religious or spiritual faith, then we must assume a similar meaning in De Morgan's portrait of a witch, conspicuous in her saffron robe, in *The Love Potion* [Ill.]. The thorny path of the title comes from repeated passages in *The Result of an Experiment*, and emphasises De Morgan's affinity with those martyred women who choose their spiritual calling despite the ostracisation from society this may engender. It was exhibited with an accompanying poem written by Alice Fleming, a fellow spiritualist, which emphasises the martyrdom chosen by the woman; "She turned from pleasure - unto suffering rather/And set her feet the thorny path along".<sup>90</sup>

An imperative to define the distinction between the diabolic, and maleficient power of witchcraft, and the mystic, religious and visionary attributes of saints and martyrs was quickly established at the beginning of the European witch-hunts. 'Evidence' for either good or evil magic required trials

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<sup>88</sup>A.M.W. Stirling, notebook *Pictures to be Purchased if Possible* (n.d.), DMFA.

<sup>89</sup> A. Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, I., p.xiv.

<sup>90</sup>A. Macdonald Fleming, *The Thorny Path* (n.d.), DMFA.

procedures: with witnesses for the sacred canonisation of saints and martyrs, and inquisitors and torturers for those accused of witchcraft. It is important to note that witchcraft, although seen as the opposite pole to saints, was still considered to be on the same scale of Christian values. Indeed, it is this arbitrary division between perceived 'good' occult practitioners, and the alleged witches, that De Morgan explores in her many occult/martyr paintings. The corresponding relationship presented by De Morgan between witches/mediums and witches/martyrs is explored in the following chapter. De Morgan's sympathy with oppressed women, combined with her emphasis on individual morality and spiritual belief is encompassed in these sets of paintings. Although the representation of the martyrs, particularly those recognisable saints such as St. Catherine and St. Christina, may superficially suggest an adherence to traditional Christian doctrine, De Morgan's specific treatment of such subjects reveals that this is not the case. Indeed, her paintings of these subjects posit a critique of patriarchal legislation and ideology concerning martyr/witches, drawing our attention to the inequalities of historical events dominated by the Christian church, and mediating these themes through depictions of female empowerment and spiritual autonomy.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Witches, Occultism and 19th century Spiritualism**

#### **4.1 Spiritualism and the Occult**

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that the development of Victorian art from the mid-nineteenth century incorporated and indeed provided a framework for the dominant discourses of science, religion and sexuality, as well as the wider climate of political and social change. It is therefore not surprising that related images were emphatic in their subject matter and composition. Indeed, one of the lasting influences of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers is the recurrent depictions of women, death and sexuality, as vehicles through which to explore and express both sexual and spiritual concerns.

De Morgan's engagement with spiritualism and the occult provides a fruitful source of subject-matter in her work, and her representations of occult figures are often at odds with the portrayals of similar themes by contemporary artists. Artists both generated and perpetuated stereotypical images of witches and the occult by the employment of conventional western artistic and literary iconography and themes, demonstrated in the works of artists such as Sandys and Burne-Jones. Equally, depictions of spiritual goodness and martyrdom rely upon established codes of symbolic meaning, with particular emphasis on the distinctions between concepts of good (mystical) and evil (magical) powers. De Morgan's personal experience in the occult as a medium provided direct impetus for the generation of images of witches, religious martyrs and occult figures. Other artists also produced paintings of such figures, but, as I will argue, respond to the hysterical mainstream condemnation of witches, clairvoyants and mystics in their construction and

production of witches as stereotyped, dangerous, subversive figures who undermine the status quo of nineteenth-century society. De Morgan's interest in the representation of witches goes beyond a debt to the traditional Pre-Raphaelite repertoire of subject-matter. The role of the witch is a common and recurring theme in the spiritualist press, and there are many articles which argue that the witch of the fifteenth-century persecutions is actually what nineteenth-century spiritualists and the media term as mediums. De Morgan herself then, along with her mother-in-law, Sophia, as practising mediums, were categorised, according to the spiritualist press, and in particular, *Light*, as practising occult figures or even as witches. Indeed, this view is expressed by the naturalist Wallace, where, discussing the cases in the European witch-trials argues "these facts are very analogous to some of the more powerful manifestations of modern Spiritualism".<sup>1</sup> This gives De Morgan's paintings of such themes a particular and personal relevance, and enables a new contextually-based analysis of the symbolism and themes within such paintings. Carl du Prel writes a sequence of essays on the correlation between witches and mediums:

We find thought reading [...] with the saints, possessed persons, witches, somnambulists, and mediums: [...] rappings, spirit-writing, acting at a distance; mysterious stone-throwing with witches as well as with mediums [...] I believe likewise that science will be forced to acknowledge the existence of an "intelligible" world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A.R. Wallace, *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism. Three Essays*, London: Trubner, 1881, p.vii.

<sup>2</sup> C. du Prel, "Witches and Mediums: A Historical Parallel", in *Light*, 4 September, 1886, p.405.

In this chapter I will situate and account for De Morgan's paintings of both witches and occult figures in relation to mainstream art of the period. I will also demonstrate that De Morgan's representations of the occult and of the religious are not mutually exclusive and polarised positions, but are integrated through spiritual and mystical aspirations. Her paintings of witches and saints bear superficial similarities to those of her contemporaries, such as Burne-Jones and Sandys, but her position as both a woman artist and a practising spiritualist produce a challenging deconstruction of the artificial incompatibility which functions to distinguish between the epitome of good (the saint or martyr) and the epitome of evil (the witch or occultist). Rather than operating in clearly defined separate spheres, De Morgan's conceptions of models of traditionally held divisions of good and evil share remarkably similar characteristics, thus obscuring the boundaries of moral judgement. In De Morgan's work, religious mysticism and witch-practises are bound by shared female experience. This experience depends upon the platonic concept of an Ideal, which for De Morgan, is the goal of the mortal. Heightened spiritual awareness and suffering through physical life enables the soul to progress after state of death. Rather than the witch and the saint being exclusive categories, I will argue that De Morgan conversely constructs her images to demonstrate that these archetypes are in fact, mirror images of transgressive groups of women.

#### **4.2 Witches and the Occult**

With the growth of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, stereotypes of witches as evil crones with malign influences, the practise of witchcraft and the occult were radically challenged. Sophia De Morgan's lifelong devotion to mediumship, clairvoyance, and healing, epitomised the pivotal role of women in the

occult. Healing, mesmerism and communication with spirits from the 'other world' offered an empowerment and celebration of what continued to be held as the female "essence" or emotionally charged potential for both natural intuition and nature, and as the esoteric centre of re-birth. In the Old Testament it is the female who has charms, potion and occult knowledge, in the European witch-hunts women were the primary target and, as Rosemary Ruether argues in *The Persecution of Witches: A Case of Sexism and Ageism*:

There are various reasons why women have primordially appeared in these roles. The mysteries with which the witch deals - birth and death, the chthonic realm, medicine, midwifery, even contraception - flow out of the woman's role as mother, cook, pharmacist, doctor, symbol of maternal and earth power.<sup>3</sup>

Although this presents an essentialist reading in terms of what is conceived as innately 'feminine' power and potential, the late nineteenth-century perception of women as the embodiment of spiritual and psychic phenomena did enable many women through spiritualism to achieve a status and power denied them in other spheres of public life. The contentious practices of spiritualism, like the controversy surrounding the claims of witchcraft from the fifteenth century onwards, focused on women as the primary instigators of supernatural deeds.

Magic, mythology, religion and rituals form integral elements of western culture, from the Greek creations of figures such as Medusa and Medea, to the European archetype of the hag-like woman witch, hunted and put to death in vast numbers on the orders of the Catholic church. De Morgan not only chooses to paint

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<sup>3</sup> R. Ruether, "The Persecution of Witches: A Case of Sexism and Ageism", in *Christianity and Crisis*, 34, 1974, pp.291-95.

witches, but does so in an unusually poignant and sympathetic style, at odds, as I will demonstrate, with the dominant fashion of her contemporaries. As a well-educated woman who had studied the Classics as a child,<sup>4</sup> and followed spiritualism as an adult, the choice and presentation of legendary witch figures in her paintings suggests a particular sympathy with the history of witches. This interest in witches and the European witch-hunts is a key theme recurring in the LSA journal *Light*, which explores and makes explicit the clear relationship between the perceived practice of witchcraft in fifteenth-century Europe, and current anti-spiritualist debate in the nineteenth century. De Morgan's interest in the views expressed in *Light* have already been established, and in addition to this, her interest in tragic situations which require courage and adversity are evident in the stories and poem she had written since childhood. Stirling comments that:

No home could have been more free from gloom than the sunny house in Upper Grosvenor Street, and no child less weighted down with the sorrows of existence than was Evelyn: yet with the perversity of an imaginative temperament, all that was the antithesis to her own lot appealed most keenly to her in those early years.<sup>5</sup>

The plight of the women accused of witchcraft is well documented in books, transcripts, plays and legend. In the nineteenth century, in Germany and France, scholarly interest in witches and witchcraft began to argue that "the alleged witches had been misunderstood and mistreated".<sup>6</sup> Walter Scott published his *Letters on*

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<sup>4</sup>Stirling notes that Evelyn was unusually privileged and "learnt Greek and Latin, besides French, German and Italian: she studied classical literature, and became deeply versed in mythology", *William De Morgan*, p.144.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>6</sup>J. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1980, pp. 131-4.



*Demonology and Witchcraft* in 1830, which, as Russell asserts, because of the writer's "popularity and prestige, had a great effect in reviving interest in witchcraft".<sup>7</sup> In 1839, the respected scholar Franz-Josef Mone argued that:

Witchcraft derived from a pre-Christian clandestine cult of the Graeco-Roman world, a cult connected with Dionysos and Hecate and practised in the lower strata of society. Mone's argument had an impact on a world frightened of revolutionary excesses and afraid of secret societies.<sup>8</sup>

The popularity and revival of Shakespeare plays, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, renewed interest in perceptions of witches. Contemporary anthropological studies included the examination of the role of the witch, and the link to pagan fertility cultures and concomitant social rituals and customs surrounding magic in the hugely popular and influential book by James Frazer: *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, published in 1890. Frazer's seminal work is threaded with references to the importance of scientific study, yet notes its strong connections with magic and ritual. He makes particular references to the work of Charles Darwin, and he sees the evolutionary development of culture reaching its culmination in nineteenth-century scientific expansion:

In short, religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science. But while science has this much in common with magic that both rest on a faith in order as the underlying principle of all things [...] the difference flows naturally from the different modes in which the two orders have been reached. For whereas the order on

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

which magic reckons is merely an extension, by false analogy, of the order in which ideas present themselves to our minds, the *order laid down by science is derived from patient and exact observation of the phenomena themselves* [...] Here, at last, after groping about in the dark for countless ages, man has hit upon a clue to the labyrinth, a golden key that opens many locks in the treasury of nature. It is probably not too much to say that *the hope of progress - moral and intellectual as well as material - in the future is bound up with the fortunes of science, and that every obstacle placed in the way of scientific discovery is a wrong to humanity*.<sup>9</sup> (My italics).

Frazer's book invokes allusions to Plato, and metaphors and analogies of science and religion which have striking similarities with the language and concepts expressed in Evelyn's and William De Morgan's *The Result of an Experiment*. Frazer was part of the social circle in which the De Morgans moved, including William Morris, George Bernard Shaw and Walter Crane.<sup>10</sup> Frazer's book was widely read and discussed, and the similarities of ideas and expressions provide a strong argument for its influence over Evelyn and William. Frazer reaches a very different conclusion about the supremacy of material, empirical science over the spiritual plane of existence however, with the De Morgans spiritualism emphasising the importance of spiritual and moral progression over scientific endeavour. Central to the argument in both books is the evolutionary metaphor, and the impact of the collision of science and religion in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London: Penguin, 1890; repr. 1996, p.854.

<sup>10</sup> In a letter to A.M.W. Stirling, John Spargo, director and curator of the Bennington Historical Museum and Art Gallery, USA, relates to Stirling that he remembers William De Morgan, William and May Morris, "the Frasers (*sic*) - Golden Bough -" as well as Shaw and the Webbs. Dated July 3, 1950, DMFA.

Witches and the supernatural also preoccupied the Symbolist painters in both Britain and Europe. The exchange between British artists, such as Rossetti and Burne-Jones, and continental Symbolists, such as Fernand Khnopff and Gustave Moreau, whose works were exhibited in London and the New and Grosvenor Galleries, and at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars in Paris, engendered an active interchange of ideas and images, which were saturated with the predilection for sexual, dangerous women, threatening sexuality, and images of death, so popular in the fin-de-siècle culture. Artists were drawn to the occult in the late nineteenth century, joining groups such as The Rosicrucians, and the Order of the Temple of the Orient. In England, occult movements proliferated, with organisations such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Membership included writers such as William Butler Yeats, Bram Stoker, and also Alistair Crowley.<sup>11</sup> Russell also argues that the challenges to religion, and the social unrest of the nineteenth-century provide a framework for scholarly interest, and more importantly in relation to De Morgan's work, a climate of sympathy with witchcraft and the occult. It is also interesting to note that Bram Stoker, noted by Stirling as a close friend of the De Morgans, was also a member of the Golden Dawn society. His novel *Dracula* epitomises an interest in the cult of beyond-the-grave experience. Notorious occultists, however, such as Alistair Crowley, were considered charlatans and diabolists by the De Morgans. In several passages in *The Result of an Experiment*, spirits entreat Evelyn: "never drift back into physical *séances* on scientific pretences; they are diabolism, and you know it [...] I bid you look up not down, and for ever cast away childish things."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft*, p.133. See also section "Romantic Revival", pp.131-137.

<sup>12</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, pp.77-78.

Witches and the occult were an obvious choice of subject for artists inspired by romantic medieval tales and female sexuality, such as Rossetti and Burne-Jones. However, the contemporary discourses of sexuality, sorcery and spiritualism had their roots in European history, and the persecution of so-called witches has interesting correspondence in De Morgan's art and spiritualist beliefs. Several factors about the European witch trials are worth examining in the light of her representations. Like De Morgan's portrayals of women in mythology, her witches are presented with unusual pathos and empathy. In a dramatic break with the traditional views of witches, De Morgan's depictions suggest a real concern with both the historical views of witchcraft, and a challenging of popular stereotypes. The dramatic and well-documented history of European witch-hunts provides compelling evidence of the immolation of single women to the transformation of the new religion: Christianity. In a parallel with the convergence of the established doctrines of Christianity, and the new "religion" of empirical science in the nineteenth century, the European witch-hunts were initiated by the impact of "the encounter between Christianity and Celtic and Teutonic religions [which was] one of the most important steps in the formation of historical witchcraft."<sup>13</sup> Stirling notes how De Morgan was fascinated by all mythology, and in particular, Celtic and Norse mythology and their pantheon of pagan gods and goddesses.<sup>14</sup> Paintings such as *The Dryad* (1884-5) and *Flora* (1894), along with her portrayals of witches, attest to her engagement with these pre-Christian pagan religions.

In the witch-hunts, the majority of accused and executed witches were women, members of society with no civil rights: those who, like their nineteenth

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<sup>13</sup> J. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft*, p.40.

<sup>14</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, pp.168-9. Stirling discusses Evelyn De Morgan's wide-ranging literary interests, and in particular her fascination with Scandanavian myths and legends, to which she makes many allusions in poetry and short stories.

century counterparts, were the socially, politically, and economically vulnerable: ageing, single females. Social historians have argued that studies have shown:

The witch-hunts provided one means of controlling women socially within a male supremacist society, using violence or the threat of violence, and relying on a particular construct of female sexuality. This specific instance of the social control of women, using the accusation of witchcraft, was a product of the socio-historical context at the time. As a result only certain women - usually older, lower-class, poor and often single or widowed - were directly affected.<sup>15</sup>

This directly corresponds with the ways in which patriarchal power was institutionalised and perpetuated in the nineteenth century, and invoked against the challenge presented by women suffragettes. The witch hunts were precipitated by the publication *Malleus Maleficarum* (Witch Hammer) 1496, written by two priests, Kramer and Sprenger, which documents the powerful authority of the Catholic church against dissident, or what were considered subversive activities, including pagan worship, and magical acts of *maleficia*.<sup>16</sup> It is both a theological and practical justification and description of witches, witchcraft; it also became the handbook tool of the Inquisition in the conviction, torture and execution of at least 100,00 people<sup>17</sup>, the majority of them women.<sup>18</sup> The central accusations of witchcraft are succinctly summed up by Ehrenreich and English:

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<sup>15</sup> M. Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p.108.

<sup>16</sup> *Maleficia* is a term derived from the Latin word *maleficus*, meaning "diabolical witch, or acts".

<sup>17</sup> J. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft*, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> This figure does vary in different scholarly accounts. For example, Barbara

Three central accusations emerge repeatedly in the history of witchcraft throughout northern Europe: First, witches are accused of every conceivable sexual crime against men. Quite simply, they are "accused" of female sexuality. Second, they are accused of being organised. Third, they are accused of having magical powers affecting health - of harming, but also of healing. They were often charged specifically with possessing medical and obstetrical skills.<sup>19</sup>

The *Malleus* is an attack on women and female sexuality, a manifestation of a deep-seated fear and misogynistic condemnation of women and what was considered heretical behaviour. A primary accusation indicted women who offered contraceptive help, clearly a heretical crime against men:

There are [...] seven methods by which they [women] infect with witchcraft the venereal act and the conception of the womb: First, by inclining the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic art; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women, sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh, by offering children to devils.<sup>20</sup>

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Ehrenreich and Deirdre English point out that "many writers have estimated the total number of killed to have been in the millions", *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, New York: The Feminist Press, 1973, pp.7-8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.10 - 11.

<sup>20</sup> H. Kramer and J. Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. M. Summers, London, Bracken Books, 1485; repr. 1996, p.47.

The crime of heresy is also attributed to most saints, before canonisation, so for both those condemned for witchcraft and those who suffered for their religious convictions, the real crime appears to be that of transgressing the boundaries of expected normal behaviour. It is this association of transgressive behaviour which links De Morgan's painted female protagonists. Whilst the openly hostile censure of women in *Malleus* may seem distant from the dominant consensus of the female sex in the nineteenth century, there are many conspicuous parallels, including the polarisation of women into the Madonna/whore binary.

Kramer and Sprenger consider the dichotomy of women's roles as either moral guardian and therefore good, or as the antithesis of this, the bad woman, who is sexually aware, as they sum up:

There are three things in nature, the Tongue, an Ecclesiastic, and a Woman, which know no moderation in goodness or vice: and when they exceed the bounds of their condition they reach the greatest heights and the lowest depths of goodness and vice. When they are governed by a good spirit, they are most excellent in virtue: but when they are governed by an evil spirit, they indulge the worst possible vices.<sup>21</sup>

*Malleus* runs through a series of questions and answers relating to the charges, punishments and "typical" categories of witchcraft, which inform the spurious conceptions of witches and witchcraft and have fuelled the imagination for five centuries. The fact that the majority of accused witches were women is integral to the charge of charge of witchcraft. Accusations of witchcraft in the fifteenth century as well as the nineteenth, can be seen a deeply entrenched misogynist

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<sup>21</sup> *Malleus* p.42.

response to the perceived threat of female solidarity in groups, using female 'deviant' sexuality as justification. In a section directly dealing with this issue, entitled: *Why Superstition is Chiefly found in Women*, it is argued on Biblical grounds that:

All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman [...] what else is woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours! [...] when a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil.<sup>22</sup>

According to the authors, the chief defect in women which make them dangerous witches, apart from the charge of "thinking alone" is sexual desire, a contentious subject in both early Europe and nineteenth-century Britain. For witches there are several distinguishing characteristics:

To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. Three general vices appear to have dominion over wicked women, namely, infidelity, ambition, and lust [...] since of these three vices the last chiefly predominates, women being insatiable, etc., it follows that those among ambitious women are more deeply infected who are more hot to satisfy their filthy lusts: and such are adulteresses, fornicatresses, and the concubines of the Great.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.



Scholarly research into the European witch-hunts, and in particular, the policies and conclusions of *Malleus*, are part of spiritualist concerns in the 1880s, and may be seen to inform De Morgan's production of occult figures in art. In *Light* for example, an article entitled "Witchcraft and the Occult" (1892) examines the relationship between the ideas expressed in *Malleus* and late-nineteenth century mediums:

"Malleus Maleficarum" [is] a sort of witch dogmatics. It is divided into three parts. The first treats of human witchcraft and compacts with the devil; the second of the effects of witchcraft and sorcery [...] the third [...] of conducting witchcraft and the punishments for all kinds of sorcerers. [...] In England special persons were appointed to hunt up witches; even in the middle of the seventeenth century [...] hundreds of unfortunate women were sent to the scaffold.<sup>24</sup>

It is within this framework of a historical and spiritualist revisionism of witches and their relationship to contemporary mediums in which De Morgan's occult figures and narratives are most effectively understood.

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<sup>24</sup>"Witchcraft and the Occult", in *Light*, 1 October, 1892, p.487.

### 4.3 Mythological Witches

The notion of the lusting woman, whose desire overwhelms all else, is often encoded as an archetypal woman, such as Eve<sup>25</sup>, and is also part of the powerful and shocking story of the legendary witch Medea. A popular subject with many artists of the nineteenth century, versions of Medea were painted by artists including Bayes (1900), Draper (1904), Howard (1841), Solomon (1878), Prinsep (1888), Sandys (1869) and Waterhouse (1907). One of the most melodramatic and colourful characters, Medea was:

One of the truly complex women in mythology. She was intelligent, passionate, cunning and assertive. At the same time she was emotionally vulnerable. She was capable of unconditional love but just as capable as its opposite. Her heritage was distinguished but strange, starting with Helios, the sun, her grandfather. Her father was Aeetes, who was brother of Perses, Circe, and Paisphae. So Medea came by her unusual powers quite naturally. Her mother was called Idyia, daughter of Oceanus, but various writers

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<sup>25</sup>A.L. Barstow, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History", in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4, 1988, pp.7-19. Barstow points out:

How misogyny, the hatred of women, in addition to patriarchy, the rule over women, caused females to be singled out, needs to be made clear [...] This was not caused by something innately evil about women, nor any change in their nature: the cause was the specific connection that Dominican inquisitors and theologians made between witchcraft and women, *based on ancient Christian beliefs about the defective, evil nature of women*. (Barstow, p.18). My italics.

suggested other possibilities, even Hecate, the divinity of witchcraft.<sup>26</sup>

In Ovid's collection of transforming myths and legends *Metamorphoses* (43 BC-AD 17) Book VII, the story of Jason and his search for the Golden Fleece has a dramatic and tragic turn when Medea, a princess from the barbarian land of Colchis, saves Jason's life, and uses her magic skills to enable him to complete otherwise impossible tasks. Falling passionately in love with Jason, who promises to marry her, Medea leaves her home and family to go with Jason, and in the process of their escape, she murders her younger brother in order to hasten their exit. To reconcile the betrayal of her family, Medea's anguish is expressed in her hopes of her future with Jason, for whom she has sacrificed all:

The things I leave behind are of little worth, but precious are the objects I pursue - the glory of having saved the Greek heroes, a knowledge of a land better than this, and cities whose fame has spread even to these shores. I shall become acquainted with all the art and culture of such cities, and I shall have Jason, for whom I would barter all the wealth the world holds. With him as my

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<sup>26</sup> R. Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp.293-96. Hecate, as Bell notes, may well be linked to Medea, but unlike the crimes of despair wrought by Medea, Hecate was regarded as a fearful deity, ruling over the underworld. As a subject for De Morgan, Hecate's proclivity for demoniac cruelty may have been at odds with De Morgan's own profound spiritual beliefs in noble and lofty struggle. Bell describes Hecate as: A kind of queen of witches, high priestess of the occult. At night she sent forth demons and spectral beings to prey on and startle unwary passersby. Her name was most likely used as a warning to unruly children. Her ministers lurked at intersections of roads, at graves, and near spots where blood had been spilled in commission of murders. She herself often wandered with the disembodied, and her approach was signalled by the whining and howling of dogs (pp.219-220).

husband, men will call me the fortunate favourite of heaven, and my  
head will touch the stars!<sup>27</sup>

At Jason's request, Medea uses her powerful witchcraft to give renewed youth to Jason's father, invoking a secret mystic pagan ritual, a fantastic conglomeration of superstitious beliefs which appears to inform the suppositions of *Malleus Malificarum*:

Medea herself, with streaming hair, circled the flaming altars [...] she dipped her well-cleft torches in the trench, full of black blood [...] meanwhile a potent liquid of mysterious power was boiling in the cauldron she had set on the flames, bubbling and foaming, frothing whitely. [Into the mixture she added] the flesh and wings of a horrid screech-owl, the entrails of a werewolf, that monster that can change its bestial features for those of a man - all these went in: nor did she forget the scaly skin of a scraggy Cinyphian water-snake, and a stag's liver [...] and the head and beak of a crow more than nine generations old. With these and a thousand other nameless ingredients the barbarian princess prepared to accomplish a deed beyond mortal power.<sup>28</sup>

Going on to kill Pelias, so that Jason's father Aeson can take his throne, Medea and Jason take their two sons and go to Corinth. Here Jason betrays Medea, rejecting her in order to marry to fulfil his ambitions, and marries the daughter of the Corinthian king. In a terrible revenge, Medea kills her own two sons, sends a

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<sup>27</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VII, trans. M. Innes, London: Penguin, 1995, p.156.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.

poisoned robe to Jason's bride which consumes her and her father the King, with fire, and then leaves for sanctuary to Athens. Medea then, is a figure full of passion and ardour, love and hate. Whilst the crime of infanticide (a common accusation aimed at midwives of witchcraft) is usually identified as the central feature of Medea's legend, De Morgan chooses to focus on Medea as a woman, alone, powerful, beautiful, but infinitely sorrowful.

De Morgan's unusually restrained and refined version of *Medea* (1889) [Ill.30] is very different from the stricken, deranged woman painted by Frederick Sandys (1868) [Ill.31]. Clearly one of De Morgan's favourite paintings, *Medea* was exhibited at the New Gallery (3rd Summer Exhibition) in 1890, the Walker Art Gallery, (Summer Exhibition) 1890; 20th Liverpool Autumn exhibition, in her lifetime, and has subsequently appeared in five other exhibitions.<sup>29</sup> Euripides' play, *Medea* (431 BC) focuses, like De Morgan, on Medea as a real person, revealing the anguish and despair brought about by Jason's rejection, rather than the sensational portrayal of Medea involved in casting reckless spells. Both Sandys's *Medea* and Waterhouse's study for *Jason and Medea* (c.1907) [Ill.32], are half-length portraits of dark-haired women (emphasising her association with witchcraft and the night), with pale, waxy skin and rapt, chilling dark eyes and menacing expressions. Medea is shown in Waterhouse's version mixing the potion which will destroy the princess and her father, and as she pours, she gazes in a fixed frown out of the canvas, her rigid expression of deadly intent makes clear the malevolent spell she is weaving. Alongside her coils a serpent, its sinuous grace echoing the curve of Medea's right hand holding the lethal potion. The artist combines fear and evil with beauty and

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<sup>29</sup>The exhibitions in which *Medea* have appeared in the 20th century include: Nottingham Castle Museum, 1982; *The Women's Art Show: 500 Years of Women's Art*; Rochdale Art Gallery, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists*, 1987; Manchester, Birmingham and Southampton, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, 1997-8.

harmony, posited as the perceived dual characteristics of women in western culture. Surrounding Medea are the intertwining trunks of a feral forest, their twisted boughs a primitive reminder of Medea's barbarian pedigree, and paralleled in Medea's bound hair, and serpent companion. The claustrophobic setting of overgrown gloom and twisting serpent provides an anti-Edenic setting, reminding the viewer of Eve, and the consequences of her yielding to her desire, encouraged by the sibilant whispers of the serpent. Here, again, we have the figure of 'woman' presented as the archetype and originator of wickedness and vengeance.

Waterhouse, like Sandys, paints Medea as the locus of diabolical, meditated evil, with no reference to the part Jason plays in the tragedy. Sandys presents a similar woman; a dramatic close-up of her face and shoulders constrained behind the barrier of the frame serves simultaneously to make her presence immediate, yet safely confined. The viewer is invited to gaze upon the distracted countenance of the witch as she passes the thread of the robe through the potion, which will consume the princess's body with fire. Interestingly, the thread for this robe is red: the colour of the martyr. However, in De Morgan's version, the crimson draperies of martyrdom are appropriated for Medea herself, in reference to Jason's betrayal of her. These striking details mark the very different perspective taken by De Morgan from her contemporaries. In Sandys's version, as in Waterhouse's, Medea is surrounded by the sensationally-charged accoutrements of her craft, which turn out to be an eclectic collection of malevolent-looking toads, poisonous berries, dried fish, exotic shells, an Egyptian idol and indecipherable texts. The *Art Journal*, 1888 noted that:

In the "Medea," which was painted in while the artist was a guest of Mr D.G. Rossetti, we have again a transcript of female beauty, but,

like the "Morgan le Fey," it is beauty distorted by passion and made ghastly by despair.<sup>30</sup>

Clutching her throat and staring outwards, with her head flung back at an unnatural angle, this Medea is the untamed barbarian, existing only in the romantic imagination of the male: the distraught woman who is bent on destruction and wreaking havoc, corresponding with the strategies used in his painting *Morgan Le Fay* (1862-3), which "emphasises the evil, fanatical wickedness of Arthur's nasty half-sister who makes an enchanted robe to consume him with flames."<sup>31</sup> Sandys's representation of Medea is entirely in keeping with literary compositions of the period. As Kestner notes, the production of both heroes and wicked women was common currency, where:

The reconstruction of myth could involve not only processes of education but also those of indoctrination. A key text in such a process was a book such as Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes* of 1855, which promulgated the heroic idea to children by studying three male heroes, Perseus, Jason and Theseus.<sup>32</sup>

Kestner shows how presentations of "heroes" involve the subjugation of those female protagonists, so that figures such as Medusa "for all her beauty, she was as foul and venomous as the rest"<sup>33</sup> and as for Medea, Jason "could not love her, after all her cruel deeds. So he was ungrateful to her, and wronged her; and she revenged

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<sup>30</sup> [Anon] "Frederick Sandys", in *Art Journal*, Winter, 1884, p.77.

<sup>31</sup> J. Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, p.118.

<sup>32</sup> J. Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting*, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996, pp. 50-51.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Kingsley, quoted in Kestner, p.51.

herself on him"<sup>34</sup> This simplification and glossing over of the part of the male in the tale is reflected in the paintings of Sandys and Waterhouse, revealing the intention to "inculcate heroic paradigms [...] that empowered them [males] in the culture."<sup>35</sup> Against this predominant trend of demonstrating the inherent flaws of the *femme-fatale*, De Morgan's *Medea* differs in a number of important ways. A lone, full-length figure dominates the canvas, but all references to excessive violence and loss of control are vanquished by the emphasis on simple, understated lines. De Morgan's *Medea* is not a decadent vamp, but a dignified, composed, and resolute woman, whose distant gaze speaks of great inner-turmoil and suffering. Jan Marsh argues that:

De Morgan rewrites the murderous mother of the classical world as a wronged woman whose magical powers should have attracted respect, not the cruel dismissal she received from the faithless Jason.<sup>36</sup>

The text of Euripides play *Medea* also makes critically manifest the guilt assumed by Jason in the story. In explaining to Medea why she should accept his marriage to Glauce, and allow her sons to live with the newly-married couple, whilst she faces exile and despair, Jason reveals the deep vein of misogyny which underpins this story:

Jason: You women have reached a state where, if all's well with your sex-life / You've everything you wish for; but when *that* goes wrong / At once all that is best and noblest turns to gall. / If only

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> P. Gerrish Nunn, and J. Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, Manchester: Manchester City Art Galleries, 1997, p.141.



children could be got some other way / Without the female sex! If  
 women didn't exist / Human life would be rid of all its miseries.  
 (*Medea*, 562-593)

When Medea decides, after much soul-searching, she decides to send her sons to  
 the palace,

Bearing gifts, a dress / of soft weave and a coronet of beaten gold. /  
 If she takes and puts on this finery, both she / and all who touch her  
 will expire in agony; / With such a deadly poison I'll anoint my gifts.  
 (*Medea*, 767-802).

The colour of the robe is not mentioned here, so the red threads of Sandy's *Medea* are a subjective, and revealing interpretation, attributing guilt to Medea, the reverse of De Morgan's construction. The conspicuous use of the red draperies carries important connotations "intimately connected within it are the two most profound human impulses - doing and suffering, freedom and tyranny."<sup>37</sup> De Morgan's *Medea* is surrounded by conventional symbolism and iconography which confirm the intentions of the painting as a challenge to the more typical productions. The white doves, following Medea down the splendid marble hall, have a dual meaning for both Christianity and paganism. In the Judeo-Christian context, the dove stands for the Holy Spirit, and for the sublimation of the instincts and specifically, of the erotic instincts. This reading, then, is clearly at odds with both the story of Medea, and De Morgan's visualisation of her. Indeed, the white doves in the context of the *Medea* legend suggest a pagan iconography, where the doves "represented the pledge of love which the lover offered the object of his desire".<sup>38</sup> Far from

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<sup>37</sup> J. Chevalier, *Dictionary of Symbols*, pp.792-795.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.306-7. The pagan symbolism of the white dove is drawn from

"sublimating her erotic instincts" in a Ruskinian female ideal, Medea is acting on those instincts; she states:

Now let things take their course. What use is life to me? / I have no  
land, no home, no refuge from despair. / My folly was committed  
long ago, when I / Was ready to desert my father's house, won over  
/ By eloquence from a Greek, whom with God's help I now / Will  
punish. He shall never see alive again / The sons he had from me.  
From his new bride he never / Shall breed a son; she by my poison,  
wretched girl, / Must die a hideous death. Let no one think of me /  
As humble or weak or passive; let them understand / I am of a  
different kind; dangerous to my enemies, / Loyal to my friends. To  
such a life glory belongs. (*Medea*, 767-842).

This remarkably modern speech of independence and empowerment is not the product of the feverish, semi-hysterical woman in the other paintings. These are the words of a clear-sighted and logical woman who has weighed up the possibilities and consequences of her abandonment by Jason, and come to a firm, and courageous decision. The inevitable bloodshed and horror of the multiple deaths do not create easy entertainment. Rather, Euripides raises many issues about gender, commitment, and the empowerment of women to take control of their own destinies. At the climax of the play, when Jason discovers Medea's revenge, he bemoans the loss of his children - the sons he was prepared to give up in favour of having children of royalty with the princess, and Medea's replies reveal the extent of her insight:

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associations with Aphrodite's bird - an association De Morgan would be familiar with from her classical education as a child, and from the classical art studies at the Slade with Edward Poynter.

JASON: Children, how dear you were!

MEDEA: To their mother; not to you.

JASON: Dear - and you murdered them?

MEDEA: Yes Jason, to break your heart.

JASON: I long to fold them in my arms; To kiss their lips would  
comfort me.

MEDEA: *Now* you have loving words, now kisses for them: *Then*  
you disowned them, sent them into exile. (*Medea* 1376-  
1405).

This is the Medea which De Morgan paints: a woman who is flawed, vulnerable and yet powerful and determined. Her beauty and refinement are the antithesis of the savage and ruthless witch: rather, she is portrayed as woman who has undergone great suffering and mistreatment, who has only limited options left open to her. Indeed, it can be strongly argued that De Morgan's Medea is in fact re-represented against the mainstream of nineteenth-century conceptions of her, in the role of the martyr. The red robes, and the ambiguity of the magic she is about to perform, are iconographical symbols of meaning, or rather, become generators of new meanings, displacing the conventional reading of Medea in terms of a stereotypical maleficent witchcraft and hysterical female power. Underpinning the theme of betrayal and martyrdom, De Morgan uses both the symbolism of the doves: eternal love, and in the foreground of the painting, two prominently placed red roses function as the Christian symbolism of "martyr's blood"<sup>39</sup> further demonstrating that De Morgan creates a new and challenging paradigm of

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<sup>39</sup> J. Hall, *Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art*, London: John Murray, 1994, p.157.

legendary powerful women, re-presenting them as multi-dimensional and sympathetic characters. De Morgan's portrayal of *Medea* is an intimate and alternative one, which in many ways contests the dominant perceptions of women, witches, and the currency of a particular, and biased, version of history. Kestner posits the presence of a "virility complex" at work in the nineteenth century which:

Contributed to the strategy of invoking mythical conceptions of masculinity [and conversely, femininity] in Victorian art. There were six dimensions involved in this process: 1) the myth chosen (Jason's quest for the golden fleece, for example); 2) the particular episode (the retention of the fleece); 3) the elements implied by the representation (male heroism and valour); 4) the use of typological detail (Jason's powerful physique); 5) the repetition of a certain myth (Jason as archetypal male hero); and 6) the omission of other narrative elements (Jason's abandonment of Medea).<sup>40</sup>

This "omission of other narrative elements" characterises the conscious elements of selection and rejection in choosing not only which myth to refer to, but also which part of that story. In both Sandys's and Waterhouse's selection of *Medea*, the emphasis is centred on Medea's preparations for acts of violence and destruction. In De Morgan's version, the canvas is dominated by a sense of composure and serenity. Carrying a phial of red liquid, De Morgan again leaves the viewer to interpret the intention of the magic potion: it is a fixed and established reading that it is a poison, as in this setting it could just as well be part of the magic which enabled Jason to collect the fleece, or to make his father young again. In painting *Medea* in this specific and unorthodox way, De Morgan manages to produce a

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<sup>40</sup> J. Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting*, p.52.

successful painting in terms of artistic merit in an art world dominated by male regulations, as laid out by Kestner above, which at the same time is distinguished by a personal interpretation of a mythological tale, using a reversal of those codes and traditions of subject matter and execution.

An artist who appears to share a common regard for the misappropriated use of legendary witches with Evelyn De Morgan is Simeon Solomon, a friend of the De Morgans since he had met William on a holiday in Bettws-y-Coed, Wales, in 1863.<sup>41</sup> The charges of "gross indecency" which effectively extinguished Solomon's public career as an artist, was the culmination of living in a culture which prescribed roles and expectations of heterosexual masculinity. Solomon painted many allegorical figures, which were admired by Percy Bate in *Pre-Raphaelite Painters* (1899), who comments that

[Solomon's work] dealt more with abstractions, with symbols, and not with actualities. His wayward genius may be said to be akin to that of the mastery mystic Blake, but it was of a softer, gentler kind, and with less riotous exuberance of vision [...] we must not ask virile presentments of intense emotion from the genius of a mystic and exotic.<sup>42</sup>

His focus on male figures, like De Morgan's preoccupation with female figures, is also underpinned by allusions to religion. As De Morgan exchanges the male Christ saviour figure by reinscribing the religious connections of the female form with

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<sup>41</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.61. Stirling quotes many other affectionate references to Simeon Solomon in letters from William De Morgan. See pp.9, 61, 62, 77, 338, 351, for details.

<sup>42</sup> P. Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, London: George Bell, 1899, p.65.

regeneration, Solomon produces themes of priesthood in his art. Colin Cruise proposes that:

Solomon is using the priest figure as an alternative to the fixed masculinity of Christ, the 'human' Christ of the 'muscular christians'. Not only do the paintings accept priesthood as being a function of the male, but they also symbolise the new masculinity as operating always within two spheres, two states: the earthly and the spiritual, the sensual and the chaste.<sup>43</sup>

This modification of the models of masculinity and indeed gender construction in Solomon's work finds a parallel in De Morgan's spiritualisation of the female body, and in her challenge to the established codes of feminised function: the witch, the *femme-fatale*, who had been the monopoly of, and colonised by, male artists.

Both Solomon and De Morgan also produced versions of Medusa which have noteworthy similarities with each other. Like Medea, Medusa was a popular subject for nineteenth-century artists. The legend of Medusa or the Gorgon, is primarily related as the monstrous woman with snakes as hair whose gaze would turn men to stone, is once again located in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book IV. It is important to note that Medusa is prevented from telling her own story, it is only related through the words of her killer, Perseus. Ovid narrates:

He reached the Gorgon's home. Everywhere, all through the fields  
and along the roadways he saw statues of men and beasts, whom  
the sight of the Gorgon had changed from their true selves into

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<sup>43</sup> C. Cruise, "'Lovely Devils': Simeon Solomon and Pre-Raphaelite Masculinity" in *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites*, E. Harding (ed.), Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996, p.207.

stone. But he himself looked at dread Medusa's form as it was reflected in the bronze shield which he carried on his left arm. While she and her snakes were wrapped in deep slumber, he severed her head from her shoulders. (*Metamorphoses* Book IV).

Continuing on his journey, he is asked why Medusa had snakes in her hair, and in his reply recounts the events which led to the corruption of her hair:

Medusa was once renowned for her loveliness, and roused jealous hopes in the hearts of many suitors. Of all the beauties she possessed, none was more striking than her lovely hair [...] but, so they say, *the lord of the sea robbed her of her virginity in the temple of Minerva*. Jove's daughter turned her back, hiding her modest face behind her aegis: and *to punish the Gorgon for her deed*, she changed her hair into revolting snakes. To this day, in order to terrify her enemies and numb them with fear, the goddess [Minerva] wears as a breastplate the snakes which were her own creation. (*Metamorphoses*, Book IV). (My italics).

There is an arresting injustice in this passage which underpins the story and tragedy of Medusa, who, like Medea, was abused and vilified. Medusa, her only crime being so beautiful that she "roused jealous hopes in the hearts of many suitors", was then raped in the temple of Minerva, and for this violation, it was *she* and not her attacker, "the lord of the sea" who was punished. The two inherent messages of misogyny in this myth are the conflation of a male narrative speaking for the woman, and the outrageous attribution of guilt for her own rape. As with the Medea story, the elements of the myth chosen by artists to depict expose the entrenched prejudice against the powerful woman. The conflation of the serpents

and woman's hair is later echoed in the visual correspondence between women, serpents and sexuality and death. Part of the story describes how, as Perseus flies over Libya with the trophy of Medusa's head "drops of blood fell from the head. The earth caught them as they fell, and changed them into snakes of different kinds. So it comes about that land is full of deadly serpents" (*Metamorphoses*, Book IV). Blood, too, in the story of Medusa, appears as a motif of magical properties, used in the casting of spells. Both the blood and the serpents are part of established fixation with the malign power of women:

Biblical religion emphasise the demonic character of women by stigmatising menstrual blood as "unclean" [...] the source of the suppression and denigration of the female and her exclusion from male sanctuaries. It should not surprise us that in witch-lore a key substance of malignant magic is menstrual blood. Menstrual blood becomes, in patriarchy, a demonic material, like woman herself.<sup>44</sup>

Medusa was painted by Burne-Jones as part of the Perseus series (1875-85), including *The Finding of Medusa*, *The Death of Medusa*, and *The Baleful Head*. These studies are all concerned with the actions of Perseus, both in terms of the Ovid narrative, and on the pictorial plane of action, where Medusa serves as a prop or catalyst to the "important" action; to demonstrate the virile accomplishment of the hero, Perseus. Auslander Munich argues that:

Burne-Jones selects events from the Perseus story to connect the hero's quest for the Medusa to the freeing of Andromeda [...] In the last picture of the series, *The Baleful Head* (1888) the implicit

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<sup>44</sup> R. Rueter, "The Persecution of Witches: A Case of Sexism and Ageism", in *Christianity in Crisis*, 34, p.292.



comparison between Medusa and Andromeda becomes explicit [...] the series of allusions make typological connections between Andromeda, Mary and Eve.<sup>45</sup>

It is pertinent that Medea and Medusa are considered fierce and threatening monsters, witches, and sorceresses, rather than women who have been abused by the male so-called heroes. Medea has power over that great mystery, life and death, and Medusa has power over men, a power which can literally render men petrified. The prospect of turning men to stone can be read as a metaphor of male castration anxiety in the extreme. Far from being an idiosyncratic monster, Medusa comes to represent both the threat and fascination of female sexuality. Medusa's gaze literally make men petrified: entrapped by the enchantment of the once beautiful Medusa. It is this spectacle of woman/monster which is repetitively explored by nineteenth-century artists. Sandys goes one stage further, drawing *Medusa* (1875) [Ill.33] as a bizarre disembodied face, surrounded by strangling tresses of abundant curling hair, several coiling snakes on top, and two mini-wings which protrude alarmingly out of the side of her head. The most potent force in the drawing is the eyes: staring out glassily in a demented and menacing direct glare, with lowering brows, and pursed mouth. The viewer is placed as the male recipient of the ghastly effects of Medusa's stare, the threat of petrification is imminent.

Like many other of Sandys's paintings, such as the studies for *Helen and Cassandra* (c.1866) the facial expressions are more suggestive of sulkiness and petulance, with their pursed, down-turned little mouths, and sullen brows. The figures for Helen and Cassandra have more suitability to studies of spoilt little girls, bickering, rather than the Helen whose beauty could "launch a thousand ships", or

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<sup>45</sup> A. Auslander Munich, *Andromeda's Chains*, pp.122-25.

the Cassandra who was driven to despair by the curse of having the ability to see the future, but that no one would believe her. It is also difficult to ascertain that the figure in Sandys's Medusa is male or female. The portly face and heavy eyebrows are masculinised features, and have little in common with the beautiful but deadly Medusa portrayed by Burne-Jones. It does, however, have many similarities to Fernand Khnopff's *The Blood of the Medusa* (c.1895) [Ill.34], where once again the significance of blood and female power is emphasised in the title and in the drawing.

Like Sandys's Medusa, Khnopff's drawing shows head dismembered at the neck, with the face dominated by the heavy-lidded staring, sightless eyes. As with many of Khnopff's works, the sex of the subject is indeterminate, but the title acknowledges the mythological inspiration. The snakes here do not arch lithely in the creature's hair, but surge forward as if to burst from the confines of the canvas, open-mouthed and ready to strike their deadly venom. The linear and phallic constructions of these snakes are further emphasised by the ominous spectacle of one of the snakes oozing from the hair and reaching upwards inside the severed neck, showered by the effluvium of blood.

From a very different perspective of the story, Solomon draws several head studies of Medusa, such as *The Tormented Soul* (1894) [Ill.35]. Again, the artist focuses on the head, and in particular, the distraught expression of Medusa, but unlike the monstrous aspect of Sandys's Medusa, or Burne-Jones's beautiful but rarefied, and expressionless, almost serene Medusa, Solomon's chalk drawing shows Medusa as a tragic, twisting and agonised soul, trapped within the terrible confines of her body and the curse to do harm. The snakes curl in relentless patterns of enclosure around her head, and her mouth, open and contorted, reproduces the sinuous pattern of the snakes. Whereas Sandys recapitulates the horror of Medusa's gaze, Solomon's Medusa has closed, despairing eyes, and the furrowed brows

suggest the agony of her sorrow. This is a sympathetic and moving portrait of Medusa the wronged woman, as indicated by the title itself. The emphasis on the torturous lines from the snakes to the features on her despairing face circumscribe and contain the condensed horror the viewer must feel at her terrible isolation and desperation. The pathos of the conditions and account of Medusa's history is shared by De Morgan, sculpted in a bronze bust (c.1875) [Ill.36] when she was in Italy, aged between 19 and 20. However, this was part of a life-long fascination for the legendary figure: studies for the head of Medusa appear in De Morgan's earliest sketchbooks. An important achievement for such a young artist, De Morgan's bust of *Medusa* was admired for both its conception and execution, when it was exhibited in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1882. *The Studio* praises De Morgan's "*Medusa*, an impressive bust in bronze, as largely handled as it is strong and noble in conception".<sup>46</sup> This bust of *Medusa* has the strong, defined features of Renaissance sculpture, yet the oblique angle of her head, and the open, but distant quality of her eyes, are suggestive of deep introspection and melancholy. The serpents entangled with her own hair, writhe in heaving masses and horribly accurate detail. Around her neck, one snake has detached itself, and curves its way downwards to a freedom that the Medusa herself can never know. This rendition of Medusa, like Solomon's, is much closer to the Symbolist ethos, suggesting a psychological state. Of De Morgan's bust, Stirling writes, "the whole conveys a sense of evil, of strength, of relentless force - yet mingled with a tragedy so profound that it provokes a horror which is akin to pity."<sup>47</sup> A close friend of De Morgan and fellow spiritualist, Alice Fleming wrote some verses to accompany De Morgan's portrayals of Medusa, which underpin the sympathetic approach De Morgan adopts:

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<sup>46</sup> W.S. Sparrow, "The Art of Mrs William De Morgan", in *The Studio*, IX, 1900, p.232.

<sup>47</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.186.

Medusa -

Is there no period set?

Is pain eternal?

Still through the eons must her vipers sting?

For all eternity the anguish burn?

An endless aside [? word unclear], endless suffering!

Beauty that had lit Heaven, shut deep in Hell<sup>48</sup>

In Fleming's poem, written as a response to De Morgan's bust, emphasis is placed on the unjust treatment accorded to Medusa, punished for being a beautiful woman. In a later pastel drawing of Medusa, signed EP and dated 1885, De Morgan attempts a more conventional sketch which shows a shift in style. This Medusa is placed, like Sandys's version, in a circular framework, including the disembodied head. Other than these features, however, there is little common ground. De Morgan's version retains the demeanour of a humane figure, with a non-threatening, ingenuous gaze. Although the serpentine locks are seething once again around Medusa's head, they are intermingled with thick golden tresses, which undulate around the face like the mane of a lion. The primary effect of the hair is to serve as a flattering frame for the face. The attention and emphasis here, unlike her earlier sculpting, is on the aesthetic efficacy created by the torturous linear form and patterning created by the hair/snakes, producing a fantasy figure with many references to the Aesthetic movement in art. This later study is interesting as the

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<sup>48</sup> DMFA. This poem is in an envelope labelled by Stirling (n.d.) "Lines written on this picture by Mrs Fleming (Rudyard Kipling's sister)". On the first side of the paper is a poem called "Fragments". The painting to which these lines refer has not yet been established.

gender of the figure, unlike the earlier version, is almost indeterminate. In common with many of Solomon's works, the androgynous visage can be considered as indicative of the dominant discourses of science and religion combined. As well as offering an encoded paradigm of alternative sexuality, including the expression of homosexual desire, the androgyne could be appropriated as the embodiment of exalted spiritual distinction. Shearer West suggests that:

Through the image of the androgyne, a condition considered 'primitive' by Darwinian theorists was held to be the highest and most spiritual state of human existence. Through aesthetics, androgyny was stripped of all sexual connotations, and through mystical and occult theories, it was given a spiritual rationalisation.<sup>49</sup>

Far from the stock representation of the occult figures synthesised into the *femme-fatale*, Solomon and De Morgan illuminate very different aspects of these two notorious witches of mythology, and in doing so, add significant and challenging reconfigurations to the dominant trends in nineteenth century art.

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<sup>49</sup> Shearer West, *Fin de Siecle Art*, pp.76-77.

#### 4.4 To Heal or Harm: the Ambiguity of Power

Fascination with esoteric practises and pagan religions focus, in opposition to Christian doctrine, on the woman, or the female capacity for reproduction, as the centre of divine and mystical regenerative power. Representations of woman as embodying the life source are polarised into categories of divine grace, such as the Renaissance depictions of the Madonna, deployed by De Morgan in *The Light Shineth in Darkness and the Darkness Comprehendeth It Not* (1906) [Ill.22], as a female assuming the traditional Christ role, or as the evil, usually sexually deviant woman, such as a witch, or vampiric creature, such as Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1893).

For nineteenth-century artists and writers, particularly those influenced by the continental Symbolist movement, the body of woman is the allegorical locus through which considerations and concerns with sexuality and death are weighed, balanced and explored. Witches, considered like the female body to be the focus of Otherness, becomes a repository for external interests, power relationship and gender concerns, played out on the canvas of the painting. Many artists, such as Rossetti, with his paintings of monumental women, *Astarte Syria* (1875-7), *Lady Lileth* (1864-8) and Burne-Jones's *Beguiling of Merlin* (1874), *The Depths of Sea* (1887), Fernand Khnopff, *The Caresses or The Sphinx* (1896), Franz von Stuck, *Sin* (1893), and Jean Delville *The Idol of Perversity* (1891); produce obsessive depictions of predatory, powerful women, who enthrall and imprison men: the helpless victims of the irresistible allure of the *femme-fatale*. De Morgan's sorceress/witch figures are on the other hand, endowed with the dignity and pathos usually reserved for the iconic representations of female virtue, stereotyped in popular works such as Madox Brown's maternal figure in *The Pretty Baa-Lambs*

(1852), and the stalwart wife in Millais's *The Order of Release 1746* (1852-3). This departure from the standard formula of clearly distinguishable good versus evil in De Morgan's work corresponds to her spiritualist convictions, and is also explored by other Pre-Raphaelite artists, such as Rossetti and Simeon Solomon, whose art is imbued with an intensity of emotion, including fear, longing, revulsion and compulsion, bordering on religious experience. For De Morgan, however, her experience as a medium and affinity with William De Morgan's mother, Sophia, suggests a much closer and more sympathetic and personal affiliation with representations of women linked with occult practices, in particular, the "white magic" or beneficent effects. For practising spiritualists, such as Sophia<sup>50</sup> and Evelyn De Morgan "the ability to heal was respected as one of the highest expressions of psychic power, and, as with other forms of mediumship, women proved themselves able practitioners of the healing arts."<sup>51</sup>

Healing powers are fundamentally linked with women, and the constructions of feminine gender roles revolve around the perceptions of women as somehow closer to nature, sharing intuitive knowledge of life and death. Powers of healing have, however, been accused of disguising the antithesis of healing, viewed with suspicion and fear, endowing the possessor with the potential of malevolent action. With the establishment of medicine as a profession, healing, diagnosis and treatment became appropriated into a medicalised discourse, a discourse which

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<sup>50</sup> In Sophia De Morgan's book about spiritualist experiences, she devotes several passages to the description of the processes of mediumship, and in particular, the healing process. Her writing is full of evolutionary metaphors of spiritual development, and rationalised throughout with detailed, if inaccurate, "scientific" explanations of spiritualist practices. For in-depth descriptions of the transference of power and healing from a medium to a patient, see the chapter entitled "Mediumship - Nature of Influence", in *From Matter to Spirit*, pp.96-100 where she links "the electric, magnetic and nervous forces".

<sup>51</sup>A. Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, London: Virago Press, 1989, p.107.

barred women from participation, and created laws to prevent alternative medicine from being practised.

In the nineteenth century, the expansion of spiritualist interest enabled healing and holistic medicine to be developed as an alternative to institutionalised medical practice, encouraged by organised groups such as the Society for Psychical Research, in order to empirically observe and explain processes such as mesmerism, clairvoyancy, and hypnotic healing sessions. As Owen points out:

Indeed, during the years in which Victorian medicine strove to keep women out of professional practice and to control traditional areas like midwifery, spiritualist women were finding ready acceptance as healers and healing mediums.<sup>52</sup>

However, despite the attempt to legitimise and reconcile psychic healing processes with the "proper" science of medicine, women healers continued to be viewed with suspicion:

The activities of spiritualist healers during the second half of the nineteenth century maintained the links with an ancient tradition which revered the healing gift and sought to unite it with the curative properties of the natural world. Spiritualist healing was essentially a combination of traditional techniques and spirit guidance, and women were important in both domains. They had been part of the 'ancient ways' which stretched back through wise women and white witches: they were effective mesmerists and

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.



excellent mediums. It followed that they would also make gifted spiritualist healers.<sup>53</sup>

This ambiguity between the power to do good or to do harm is explored in De Morgan's painting *The Love Potion* (1903) [Ill.29]. The witch is a full-length seated figure, who dominates the canvas by bisecting it vertically, and whose fluid arm movements, pouring the potion, serve also to form a horizontal plane, and she sits at a window preparing a scarlet liquid, pouring it from a glass tube into a silver goblet. Diametrically opposite to the maniacal hysteric, characterised in Sandys's representation of *Morgan Le Fay* (1864) De Morgan's witch is a study of calm composure, who is simultaneously a vigorously strong figure, yet arrestingly beautiful. Her rapt concentration on the potion is more suggestive of a surgeon at work rather than a deranged witch wreaking havoc. There is no relationship to Symbolist representations of witches/*femmes-fatales*, with their sense of brooding evil and depraved spirit. In *The Love Potion* the most striking features are the bright saffron robes of the witch, the jewelled bodice and the golden netted pearls which decorate her hair. Indeed, the lustrous colour and texture of her costume dominate the painting and are echoed in the sumptuous colours of the enclosed room suggesting that the painting is closer in theme and composition to the sensual portraits of women by Rossetti, such as *The Blessed Damozel* (1871-2) or *Monna Vanna* (1866), rather than the anaemic and vacant girls of Burne-Jones, or the barbarian, uncivilised women painted by Frederick Sandys. In *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, Bate remarks that De Morgan's paintings are:

Distinguished by rich and brilliant colouring, great decorative charm, and sincere poetic inspiration, qualities that mark this artist

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<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

as not the least of the disciples who have worthily worked on the lines first attempted by Dante Rossetti.<sup>54</sup>

De Morgan's witch, like Rossetti's subjects, fills the canvas with her physical presence: indicated by the solidity of flesh, the richness and luminosity of texture and immediacy of her proximity to the viewer. Other shared features are De Morgan's compartmentalisation of space, creating a curiously Byzantine flattening effect, emphasised by the clearly delineated separation of interior and exterior space, and framed by the foreshortened open windows. These subdivisions of space are frequently used in De Morgan's interior scenes, and may well operate to denote psychic imprisonment, as in the paintings *The Gilded Cage* (n.d.) [Ill.25] and *The Prisoner* (1907-8) [Ill.26].

The power and status of the witch's position is highlighted by the rich fabrics, the opulent furnishings, and the learned books behind her. Elise Smith argues:

The magician in *The Love Potion* is presented as a scholar. She is seated in her study with leather-bound volumes of Agrippa von Nettesheim and Paracelsus<sup>55</sup>, among others, among others, to indicate her status as an alchemist [...] this woman [is] not only at

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<sup>54</sup> P. Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, p.115.

<sup>55</sup> Ehrenreich notes that Paracelsus, the great scholar of medicine, actually credited his knowledge to a woman:

It was witches who developed an extensive understanding of bones and muscles, herbs and drugs, while physicians were still deriving their prognoses from astrology and alchemists were trying to turn lead into gold. So great was the witches' knowledge that in 1527, Paracelsus, considered the "father of modern medicine," burned his text on pharmaceuticals, confessing he "had learned from the Sorceress all he knew". *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, p.17.

the height of her profession, but also at the highest stage of spiritual development.<sup>56</sup>

De Morgan's allusion to Paracelsus, in the library of the witch, has contemporary resonance in the spiritualist synthesis of science and mysticism. Paracelsus, an alchemist of the sixteenth century is the subject of a book review in *Light*:

Dr Hartmann makes some very striking comparisons between the doctrines of Paracelsus and the latter-day faith of modern science. "All beings were born from the element, and consist of elementary substances out of which other forms may come into existence" [...] The doctrine of Evolution, the doctrine of Darwin and Haeckel, was held and preached by Paracelsus 300 years ago.<sup>57</sup>

The writer in *Light* draws on the analogy between mysticism, alchemy and science in the work of Paracelsus, which gives particular meaning to De Morgan's incorporation of the book title. The writer goes on to demonstrate that Paracelsus has specific relevance to nineteenth-century evolutionary concepts: "Paracelsus looks on the continually evolving forms as necessary vehicles of a continually progressing living spiritual principle, seeking higher modes for its manifestation."<sup>58</sup> De Morgan's knowledge of Paracelsus, and in particular, his contemporary currency in the spiritualist affinity with science is incorporated then into her representation of a witch, which removes the witch from the realms of a fantasy figure and presents her as a figure at the junction of science and spiritualism, and expressly linked to the evolutionary progression of the soul or matter.

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<sup>56</sup> E. Lawton Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan" in *Woman's Art Journal*, 2, Fall/Winter, 1998, p.9.

<sup>57</sup> "Paracelsus", in *Light*, 9 April, 1887, p.155.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

At the feet of the witch lies the obligatory black cat, the witch's "familiar". These were believed to be demons who had assumed animal forms, in order to help the witch carry out her diabolical magic. Black cats, dogs, toads, and rabbits could also be considered as the potential companions of witches, and it is no coincidence that such innocuous household pets should be attributed demoniac powers, as these animals often became the companions for single women, and it was chiefly single women who were targeted as witches. De Morgan herself, in the process of painting *The Spear of Ithuriel*, shows the devil in the form of a toad at Eve's head. This toad was, according to Stirling, modelled on a toad in De Morgan's garden, who was allowed to hop in and out of her studio. Stirling relates that De Morgan preferred the company of the toad to social callers, giving her maid instructions not to admit any visitors except the toad.<sup>59</sup>

In the background of *The Love Potion*, seen through an opened window, are two lovers, standing entwined on a marble terrace; a young woman in white flowing robes is embraced by a knight in armour. It is this couple who are presumably to be the recipients of the witch's spell; however, from their embrace it seems doubtful that they actually need the potion as a catalyst. It is here that the discord between the text (the title *The Love Potion*) and the composition suggests that a more abstruse reading may be required. The title suggests that the work is a straightforward narrative depiction of a sorceress preparing a love potion, but it is not clear for whom this potion is intended. The ardour of the couple in the background is at odds with the need of love potion; perhaps the potion is for the witch herself, in order to lure the attentions of the knight towards herself. These

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<sup>59</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *Life's Little Day*, London: Thornton Butterworth, 1924, pp.236-237.

ambiguities in meaning in De Morgan's paintings generate the possibility of new interpretations of the relationship between her work and spiritualist themes.

In *Queen Eleanor and the Fair Rosamund* (c.1902) [Ill.37], De Morgan continues to explore the themes of occult power, using references to the popular images of evolutionary development to review the established representations of this subject. Stirling describes the narrative function of this painting:

Queen Eleanor is seen entering the bower of fair Rosamund to which she has found her way by means of the red thread that guided her through the labyrinth surrounding it. In her hand is the cup of poison which she is going to make Rosamund drink. Evil emanations may be seen coming in with her while the terrified little Loves and the roses fly before her approach.<sup>60</sup>

This story is a favourite of the Pre-Raphaelites, treated by Arthur Hughes (1854), Swinburne (1860), Rossetti (1861), Sandys (1862) and several versions by Burne-Jones, from the 1860s onwards. This is the legend of how Queen Eleanor, wife of Henry II, came across the secret bower where he kept his mistress, Rosamund, by following a thread into the labyrinth. The betrayed Queen then killed Rosamund. De Morgan confronts the issues of betrayal and deceit conducted by men towards women, but adds allusions to witchcraft and also appropriates evolutionary references to demonstrate malevolent occult practices. Here, although the

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<sup>60</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *Pictures and Statuary by Evelyn De Morgan at Old Battersea House*, (n.d.), p.8, DMFA.

dominant impact of the painting is in the use of opulent colour, patterning and texture, the actual moment depicted, undercuts the apparent serenity and decorative composure of the scene. Eleanor, envisioned as a middle-aged woman, possibly the same age as De Morgan was herself at the time (47 years old) is clutching a phial of poison intended for Rosamund. Jan Marsh remarks that this painting exposes the late nineteenth-century artistic proclivity for “cold, cruel, even sadistic sorcery [...] sinister, sexual enchantment”.<sup>61</sup> With many similarities to *The Love Potion*, painted around the same time, youth and age are juxtaposed. In the figure of Eleanor, not commonly portrayed as a witch, De Morgan unusually invests magical powers. She is accompanied by assembly of phantasmagorical creatures, made up of rudimentary reptiles, bats, and eerie floating simian heads. As with the age-versus-youth implication for the women, the creatures too, represent the age-old primeval origins of the world, and the progress of evolution through the ape-creatures, up until the civilised veneer of nineteenth-century British life, with the spiritual and humane progress represented by the doves and cupid figures. This model of nineteenth-century progress is exemplified in De Morgan’s *The Result of an Experiment*, where angels discourse on the achievements of Victorian culture through science:

You are in a high state of civilisation and your eyes must look forward, not backward [...] Now you have Science and Music, Philosophy and Art of a growing sort, and a great striving for social growth, and underlying all a dim perception of another world. Never was there a greater age in the history of the world.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p.120.

<sup>62</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.47.

The Victorian fascination with death, theology, evolutionary principles and occultism is not surprisingly reflected in much art and literature of the period, and the resurgence of key figures from Greek mythology and medieval romance can be seen as a correspondence between nineteenth century broad cultural preoccupations precipitated by the convergence of science and religion, and the individual responses to them. For De Morgan, the construction and representation of witches can be seen as a development of the themes of the broader issues of the perceived role of women in society, and the undermining of patriarchal discourses as wide ranging as medicine, psychic phenomena and visionary humanity. The figure of the witch, like that of the woman, carries much wider implications than is suggested by a mere physical or narrative presence. Witches in the nineteenth century, as indeed now, convey connotations of power, subversion and deviation: marking her as the epitome of "Otherness". The witch, like the woman, acts as a register of perceived difference or transgression from the patriarchal defined norm of order and uniformity. She can, therefore, be deployed to either emphasise the malevolent and destructive qualities inherent in both woman/witch, or as a celebrated dissident pagan, who, breaking away from the oppressive and alienating organisation of society, endeavours to challenge and explore her own power and beliefs, her very existence determined by her adherence to deeply held principles and convictions, despite persecution and social ostracisation, in a direct conjunction with the qualities of a religious martyr. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, women occultists clearly did align themselves alongside those earlier persecuted women classed as witches, and Sophia De Morgan, written about here in an article in *Light* in 1892, is specifically mentioned in relation to the hypothesis that nineteenth century mediums associated themselves to the earlier witches, and supports the relevance of the early witch-hunts to contemporary existence:

The memoir of Mrs De Morgan that I am enabled to publish this week carries the mind back to a time when, after two centuries of oblivion, the world of spirit once more made itself felt in the lives of Englishmen. The time, since the days of the witch persecutions, had been days of spiritual darkness. The mediums had been killed off, and there was no "open vision". *That the witches were mediums, that the phenomena classed under the general name of witchcraft were, in the majority of cases, genuine phenomena such as Spiritualists are familiar with, does not admit of doubt [...]* no student of the history of these times who is also familiar with the history of Modern Spiritualism will fail to discern the resemblance between many of the phenomena observed with the witch and those now and lately observed with mediums.<sup>63</sup>

The etymological root of the word "witch" derives from old English meaning "wise one" or "magic maker" and draws from a root which meant "bending" and "shaping". Witches and mediums were seen by spiritualists as gifted and misunderstood mystics. For De Morgan, then, a personal involvement with the occult is clearly invested in the challenging constructions of controversial witch figures, an involvement motivated by a desire to actively facilitate change both in the art world, and in the general perception of the value of women in society.

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<sup>63</sup> M.A. Oxon [W. Stainton Moses] *Light*, 30 January, 1892, p.1.



## **Chapter Five**

### **The Quest for Immortality: Myths of Water and the Evolution of the Soul**

#### **5.1 Water as an Evolutionary Metaphor**

In the preceding chapters I have argued that De Morgan's focus on the female form functions as an effective vehicle for exploring a variety of beliefs and concerns drawn from prevailing nineteenth-century spiritualist concepts. These ideas are underpinned by scientific paradigms of research and rationalism. I have attempted to show that De Morgan's works are a direct response to her engagement with spiritualism, and will demonstrate in this chapter how De Morgan uses water imagery and related themes, to explore the concept of immortality and the development of the soul. I will argue that De Morgan uses water as an evolutionary metaphor; in particular, as a powerful force of transformation which functions in her art as a continuous system of symbolic renewal, through the female form.

De Morgan draws on several aspects of marine imagery, from seascapes, to the popular mythology of mermaids, and links these with aspects of contemporary natural science research, and the spiritualist emphasis on the resurrection of the soul. De Morgan creates a specific link between the regenerative and fertile connotations of water, and the reproductive powers of the female, and conjoins these elements into an artistic statement of theological concerns, which aligns the female with the divine. In Chapters Three and Four, I argued that De Morgan re-configures traditional Christian characters, such as saints and martyrs, and their ostensible opposites, witches, in order to establish a spiritual female genealogy. In this chapter, I will show that De Morgan uses the sea and sea imagery: including water, shells and mermaids as allegories of spiritual evolution, expressed through the locus of the female as the site of life, death and resurrection. These themes are expressed in a number of related motifs and symbols.

De Morgan's work interweaves popular pseudo-scientific concepts with mythological archetypes such as the supposed association between the moon and the female reproductive cycle, shells with female genitals and fecundity, and the mermaid with

the Darwinian concept of the hybrid and quest for an immortal soul. Water features prominently in the majority of De Morgan's allegorical works.<sup>1</sup> Many of De Morgan's poems and short stories focus on the sea, using stormy marine backgrounds for dramatic impetus, and many of her early watercolours and sketchbooks in the De Morgan Foundation archives are seascapes. Stirling notes that as a child, De Morgan was particularly drawn to the sea as an outlet for emotional expression:

The call of the sea rings through most of her verses; and later in life she used to say that no holiday inland was of any use to her, so keenly did she hunger for the tonic to brain and nerve which she found in the dancing waves and brine-drenched air.<sup>2</sup>

De Morgan notes in her diary several visits to the sea, particularly to Weymouth, where her sketchbooks show seascapes and marine flora and fauna. Marine imagery and metaphors offered literary and artistic strategies to express innovative ideas, or powerful images. Many nineteenth-century writers and artists were also drawn to sea and water imagery, often using it to encode specific sexual allusions. Charlotte Yonge, the popular nineteenth century author of didactic children's fiction "frequently uses the image of the sea overlooked from the vantage point of high craggy cliffs as a symbol of wild passion".<sup>3</sup> Burne-Jones's "imagination was fired by the sea [...] he peopled this sub-marine world with mermen, mermaids and their children".<sup>4</sup> Like De Morgan, Burne-Jones found the legend of mermaids a fascinating subject for painting, reproducing images of devouring, but irresistible mermaid *femmes-fatales*, such as in *Depths of the Sea* (1887). European

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<sup>1</sup> In the exhibition catalogue *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, C.Gordon (ed.), 38% of the paintings feature water imagery, compared with contemporary artists painting in a similar genre: Millais 2.8% (*Millais*, R. Ash), and Leighton, 11% (*Leighton*, Jones *et al*). The nearest figure is in John William Waterhouse's works, with 18% featuring water (*Waterhouse*, A. Hobson).

<sup>2</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.164.

<sup>3</sup> M. Harrison and B. Waters, *Burne-Jones*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1989, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.140.

Symbolist painters were also inspired by the sea, and used it to express allegorical and symbolic representations of the human psyche, including sexual desire, regeneration and also death, which, like De Morgan's work, may have been influenced by esoteric beliefs and explorations. These include works such as Gustav Klimt *Morning Waters* (1898), Giovanni Segantini *The Evil Mothers* (1894), and Walter Crane *Neptune's Horses* (1898), which all synthesise concepts of women with the sea.

Literary versions of mermaids proliferated in the nineteenth century, including the search for a soul portrayed in Hans Christian Andersen's tale of *The Little Mermaid* (1848). Tennyson's *The Sea Fairies*, *The Mermaid* and *The Merman* had been made popular in the 1853 edition of *Poems*, and fiction stories relating to mermaids abounded, such as in Oscar Wilde's *The Fisherman and his Soul* (1891). However, the mermaid and sea legends were not just confined to fictional accounts; from the mid-nineteenth century onwards these became the subject of several anthropological, natural science, and mythological analyses, such as Bassett's *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and Sailors* (1885) and Lee's *Sea Fables Explained* (1883). These accounts vary from pseudo-scientific hypotheses of the potential of evolving mermaid species, explanations of mythic or symbolic archetypes, to eyewitness report<sup>5</sup> of encounters with strange creatures from the deep.

The traditions and beliefs relating to water and the sea in the organisation of world-culture is explored in the works of the anthropologist scholar, Mircea Eliade, in the 1960s. Many of his findings describe the belief systems which inform the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and are drawn from studies of Eastern and Western culture, providing a useful framework through which to examine De Morgan's preoccupation with water in her paintings. Eliade argues that water is symbolised in all cultures as an expression of the life-force, specifically in terms of the 'maternal', where water, especially of the oceans, is equated with the primeval beginnings of life, death and ultimately resurrection. This, of course, is also central to Darwin's explanation of the origin of species evolving from primitive sea-life to complex mammals, however Eliade surveys this imagery of water as origin of life through collective cultural ritual and esoteric belief arguing that:

Water symbolises the whole of potentiality: it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence [...] In initiation rituals, water confers a “new birth”, in magic rituals it heals, and in funeral rites it assures rebirth after death. Because it incorporates in itself all potentiality, water becomes a symbol of life (“living water”). Rich in seeds, it fertilises earth, animals and women.<sup>5</sup>

Eliade’s research shows how in all cultures, women and fertility are closely aligned to the life/death paradigm represented by water. These analogies extend to mystic links with water, the female and the potent connotations of the moon:

[Water] contains in itself all possibilities, it is supremely fluid, it sustains the development of all things, and is therefore either compared or even directly assimilated with the moon. Its rhythms are fitted to the same pattern as the moon’s: they govern the periodic appearance and disappearance of all forms, they give a cyclic form to the development of things everywhere [...] since prehistoric times, water, moon and woman were seen as forming the orbit of fertility both for man and for the universe.<sup>6</sup>

The sign ‘woman’ is conflated with the connotation of water as the maternal propagator. Yet this has dual effects, where conversely woman comes to symbolise irresistible allure, awe, and the potential of destruction. The dominance of the female as seductress, vampire, mermaid and *femme-fatale* in the nineteenth century has been well documented in studies by Dijkstra (*Idols of Perversity*, 1986), Kestner (*Mythology and Misogyny*, 1996), Auerbach (*Woman and the Demon*, 1982), and Auslander Munich (*Andromeda’s Chains*, 1989). This research reveals important insights into male sexual anxieties and identity, but uncover little about the exploration of similar themes by women artists of the same period.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Eliade, “The Waters and Water Symbolism”, in *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1958, pp.188-189.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189.

Eliade's account of repeated symbols across cultures, is indebted to Platonist philosophy, particularly Plato's Theory of Forms, which, as I have argued in Chapter Three, also informs much of De Morgan's paradigm of the evolving soul. The notion of an absolute transcendental signifier, the Divine, from which all else is a shadow or imitation, is integral to the language employed in De Morgan's automatic correspondence with spirits:

Best of all is the love of perfection. It is the secret of art. Perfection of idea and execution, hatred of discord and ugliness. My mind shows me shadows of men struggling with ugliness and grovelling in the mire, and others struggling to catch the light that from other suns pierces the mire. These are artists, and the toil of their lives is well spent, and the faint ideas of reality they are the means of showing to the bound prisoners of the mire are among the most valuable gifts to poor human nature [...] Knowledge is to come. Power is not yet yours. But struggle on and in time things apprehended dimly will become plain, and light will break.<sup>7</sup>

This concept of art as a means of accessing a glimpse at an absolute reality held currency in the nineteenth century, and is echoed in a review of William De Morgan's aquatic designs for pottery, which argues that marine imagery provides a means for artists or poets to explore abstract or metaphysical realms:

The deeps of the sea - fishes seen behind clustering sea-weed in a pale green light - are suggested in several of these "plane upon plane" patterns [...] I hope it is not straining a point to dwell on this feature in some of De Morgan's patterns; the suggestion of an *essential* seen through shimmering water, [...] the reaching through a tangle to things that count: peering through the ordered pattern of trivial matters to the real life

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<sup>7</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.54.

beyond.<sup>8</sup>

In both the works of William and Evelyn De Morgan, water is a medium of symbolic importance, revealing an interest in deeply-held beliefs about existence itself. As Morris specifies, the iconography of water can be read in De Morgan's work as a desire to access the intangible, esoteric world beyond the physical existence of everyday life, and I propose that this is also the case in Evelyn De Morgan's prolific employment of marine imagery.

Water is particularly attractive as a metaphor for De Morgan's spiritualist concerns. She exploits the traditional meanings associated with water in order to articulate her interest in rebirth, the soul, and the corporeal limitations of the body. Indeed, with the evolutionary debate which informs much of De Morgan's thematic concerns, the iconography of water is a central metaphor for potentiality and evolution. As Eliade observes: "in cosmogony, in myth, ritual and iconography, water fills the same function in whatever type of cultural pattern we find it; it *precedes* all forms and *upholds* all creation."<sup>9</sup> The evolutionary metaphor related to water was also linked to scientific theories of the order of evolution, and Pater remarks upon its symbolic use in the work of Leonardo da Vinci who "knew that the sea had once covered the mountains which contain shells, and of the gathering of the equatorial waters above the polar".<sup>10</sup>

De Morgan's use of water and shell iconography relate directly to interest in the origins of life, combined with a concept of the spiritual infused with nature. In *Lux in Tenebris* (1895) [Ill.21], the primeval origins of the world are represented by a female figure, an inverted Messianic figure, who is bringing light to an emerging world. This work demonstrates the appropriation of the Darwinian view of the origins of life evolving from rudimentary creatures incubated or generated from primeval seas, interpreted by De Morgan through the intervention of an angel, or spirit, who is depicted here as bringing

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<sup>8</sup> M. Morris, "William De Morgan", in *Burlington Magazine*, August/September, 1917, p.73.

<sup>9</sup> M. Eliade, "The Waters and Water Symbolism", in *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, pp. 188-189.

<sup>10</sup> W. Pater, *The Renaissance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1873, repr. 1998, p.70.

spiritual enlightenment to a primitive world. The resonance of the word “lux” in the title of the painting, rather than light, underpins this reading, placing emphasis on the meaning of light in its primordial origins. The composition of the work places central significance on the sea; suggesting an evolutionary realm of the development of species. Here, these are represented by monstrous crocodile-like reptiles, which illustrate the basest elements of the evolutionary chain. These creatures are primeval entities, driven only by instinct and self-preservation. They are juxtaposed to the figure of an angel, creature of the air and celestial realm, whose role it is to support the development from marine beast to the highest capabilities of the human soul. As I have shown in Chapter Two, these base reptilian creatures occupy a masculine locus for De Morgan, creating an oppositional and polarised position to the redemptive and divine potential of the female body, and as such, function as an indirect critique of nineteenth-century patriarchy. This divine redemptive female figure is at odds with contemporary views of women as the life/death archetype. Pater’s famous description of the Mona Lisa<sup>11</sup> reveals deep-seated male anxieties about the perceived role of the female as matrix of birth and extinction, correlating these female forces specifically with water:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all ‘the ends of the world are come’ [...] into which the soul and all its maladies has passed! [...] She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas [...] The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See J.B. Bullen “The Renaissance as Enactment: Walter Pater” in *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing*, J.B. Bullen, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, pp.273-299.

<sup>12</sup> W. Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp.79-80.

The focus on water as the progenitor of life itself is analogous to, and actually informed by evolutionary principles. Moreover, it also underpins the source of origin to emanate from what is considered a female source, the ocean. The nineteenth-century art critic and philosopher, Symonds, makes this point persuasively:

In another important point Evolution has reacted destructively on popular Christianity. By penetrating our minds with the conviction that all things are in process, that the whole universe is literally in perpetual *Becoming*, it has rendered it impossible for us to believe that any one creed or set of opinions possesses finality.<sup>13</sup>

For De Morgan, this idea of ‘becoming’ or being in process, the central feature of both water and evolution, provides an important vehicle for articulating specifically female and spiritualist concerns. Water can function as an intermediate state between the seen and unseen worlds. In the rejection of the orthodox, hierarchic structure of the Christian church, the revolutionary potential of adopting such formless, dynamic strategies offered by water iconography is an effective medium through which to explore new paradigms of female facilities and existence. The ‘process’ of evolution, and the notion of water as a medium of perpetual motion and renewal, is an attractive theme and metaphor through which De Morgan explores both gender expectations and spiritual belief systems. Symonds emphasises this point in his essay on evolution, as he argues:

The fundamental conception which underlies the Evolutionary method of thought is that all things in the universe exist in process. No other system has so vigorously enforced the truth that it is impossible to isolate phenomena from their antecedents and their consequents [...] the line of thought we call Evolutionary infuses new vitality into history, into every study of the past, and into all branches of criticism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J.A. Symonds, “The Philosophy of Evolution” in *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, vol.1, London: Chapman and Hall, 1890, p.7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.



This emphasis on evolution and processes of transformation is incorporated into many of De Morgan's works. The over-determination of water and related motifs in her paintings directly corresponds to ideas of evolution. As Eliade points out:

Underlying these beliefs, and all myths about human descent from the earth, vegetation and stones, we find the same fundamental idea: Life, that is *reality*, is somewhere concentrated in one cosmic substance from which all living things proceed, either by direct descent or symbolic participation.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of an original form representing the life force or reality is subsumed into the analogies suggested by water imagery in many of De Morgan's paintings. As a spiritualist, De Morgan's concern is with the development of soul from its primitive beginnings. This was a common belief held by spiritualists, as Waite demonstrates:

[Spiritualism] comprises an actual, positive, and realisable knowledge concerning the worlds which we denominate invisible, because they transcend the imperfect and rudimentary faculties of a partially developed humanity, and concerning the latent potentialities which constitute, by the fact of their latency, what is termed the interior man.<sup>16</sup>

This perspective of the emerging soul is essentially an optimistic one, shared by De Morgan until the advent of the Boer war, and then The Great War. The portrayal of light in the darkness is paralleled but inverted in the anti-war allegory, *S.O.S.* (c. 1914) [Ill.38]. In this work, the totemic image of the monumental single female form dominates the composition. However, rather than the optimistic and hopeful genesis implied by *Lux in Tenebris*, the terrible disillusion of the two wars overshadows the tone of *S.O.S.*, and the

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<sup>15</sup> M. Eliade, "The Waters and Water Symbolism" in *Patterns of Comparative Religions*, p. 192-193.

<sup>16</sup> A. Waite, *The Occult Sciences: A Compendium of Transcendental Doctrine and Experiment*, London: Kegan Paul: 1891, p.viii.

theme of the messianic woman-as-saviour undergoes a dramatic modification, suggesting despair rather than hope. Messages purporting to be from soldiers engaged in military activity in the wars in *The Result of an Experiment* discuss the Boer war in terms which echo the De Morgan's views of the degradation and barbarity it imposes upon the individual:

You must never praise war. The Devil invented it, and you can have no conception of its horrors. Boer and English here [condemned to live in a kind of purgatory] are one and the same [...] He, my Boer enemy, and I, we did not know each other on earth. We were ordered to slay one another, and here in this grey horrid place we find we are friends. Both of us leave families that mourn us. We both liked life [...] yet we murdered each other because we were told it was our duty [...] We are betrayed, but we have one consolation. We shall stick together, Boer and Briton, and hunt the Devils who have robbed us of our homes and lives. But oh, the misery and pain!<sup>17</sup>

In *S.O.S.* the pivotal figure of the woman stands in a pose unmistakably reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion. She wears the vibrant white robes, tinted with the iridescent colours of the rainbow, which consolidate the links with the hope of spiritual salvation. De Morgan situates the woman on a small platform of rock, which only just projects above the tumultuous surface of a seething sea. Surrounding her, stretching menacingly towards the woman who takes on the signification of a martyr, are a profusion of sea serpents and hybrid water monsters. Whilst on one hand this painting can be read as a critique of the horror of war, on the other, it also forms part of the overwhelming theme of De Morgan's search for a redemptive force beyond the material oppressions of the tangible world. Oberhausen argues that this painting refers directly to De Morgan's desire to use art as a vehicle to articulate a moral message in response to contemporary events:

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<sup>17</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, pp.117-118.

The literal translation of the message ('save our souls') also conveys a sense of what really is at stake when the forces of evil threaten to overcome the innocent and the good. [The female figure may be] emblematic of all the innocent victims of the war [...] from the beleaguered nations of Europe (such as Serbia or the neutral Belgium) to the inexperienced young soldiers. She may represent civilisation under siege by the forces of disorder [or] Britain's own loss of innocence during the Great War.<sup>18</sup>

This reading of *S.O.S.* underpins my assertions of the importance De Morgan accords the role of art in defining contemporary dilemmas. It is also my contention, however, to go further than Oberhausen, and argue that this painting is not just a generalised allegory of good beset by evil, but is, in fact, drawn explicitly from De Morgan's engagement with spiritualism and scientific evolutionary discourse. Marine water functions here as an incubatory maternal womb from which all life, with the capacity to choose or reject morality, emerged; and the figure of the angel presents a metaphoric, and a literal, representation of redemptive power.

Although bearing superficial similarities to the compositional arrangement of *Lux in Tenebris*, and its themes of progression from marine to human evolution, *S.O.S.* also illustrates the shift of emphasis from general social conditions, to the specific context and experience of war in Europe and also the Boer war in South Africa. Whilst the Boer war was geographically distanced, the De Morgans were forced to give up the pottery showroom in Marlborough Street in 1899, with the Autumn involvement of the Boer war, as trade was badly affected. The Great War, however, had a much greater personal impact, forcing the De Morgans to abandon their beloved winter home of Italy. Stirling writes that both Evelyn and William were deeply affected by the declaration of war in 1914, for them "the horror was intensified, fancy spared them no measure of its realisation" and, as a result, "Evelyn painted a series of pictures in which subjects relating to war time were

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<sup>18</sup> J. Oberhausen, "A Horror of War", in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings* (ed.) C. Gordon, p.83.

treated in symbolic guise".<sup>19</sup> In letters to friends, William De Morgan remarks upon the personal impact of war, questioning its effect on individual morality:

I am sorry to say that I am barbarous by nature and catch myself gloating over slaughter - slaughter of Germans of course! Half of these men I should have liked - a tenth of these men I should have loved. It is sickening.<sup>20</sup>

Like William De Morgan, other artists and writers became increasingly disillusioned by Britain's involvement in war, feeling helpless against the escalating violence. After the Jameson raid in Transvaal, Burne-Jones voices an opinion shared by many, including the De Morgans, about the futility of war, particularly for political gain:

But a material empire makes no appeal to my mind. The English achievements that I am proud of are of a very different sort. I love the immaterial [...] We've got a very different way of behaving to the little states and big ones. With big ones it's arbitration. But with little ones its ultimatum. Ultimatum to Burmah, Ultimatum to the Afghans, Ultimatum to Chitral, Ultimatum to Ashantee, Ultimatum to Transvaal, Ultimatum to Venezuela - but with America, arbitration and with the European powers, arbitration.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than writing about the impact of war, De Morgan integrates her spiritualist themes with recent events. The concrete effects of the war are evident in the iconography De Morgan adapts for the later paintings. In the earlier painting, *The Captives* (c.1910) [Ill.1], for example, a group of women in a cave are assailed by phantasmagorical monsters, but, unlike the creatures in *S.O.S.*, these monsters are transparent and illusory;

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<sup>19</sup>A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.360.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.360.

<sup>21</sup> E. Burne-Jones, *Burne-Jones Talking* (ed.) M. Lago, p.73.

a perceived, non-specific threat, rather than the tangible menace of warfare. De Morgan uses similar translucent primitive monsters in *Queen Eleanor and Rosamund* (c.1900), which, as I have argued, represent Darwinian notions of ape/human interaction, signalling the dark side of occult forces. But it is significant that in both the earlier paintings the monsters do not occupy physical space, but are painted in gauzy, diaphanous hues, and therefore they hover between matter and spirit, functioning primarily as a metaphoric warning against spiritual blindness. However, in *S.O.S.*, De Morgan endows similar beasts with a concrete existence, comparable to that of the martyr/messiah figure which dominates the scene. They, too, are antediluvian creatures, crawling emerging from the life-giving potency of their aquatic progenitor, but their torsos are solidly modelled, hewn in dark tones of grey and green, creating a disturbing and immediate confluence of jagged teeth, webbed claws, and gaping, devouring jaws.

The real experience of war and disillusion with society is expressed then through the chronological evolution of these primitive creatures in De Morgan's work, whose symbolic connotations of cruelty, spiritual arrestment, and primeval preservation instincts are in danger of besieging the spiritual enlightenment which is De Morgan's primary concern. As the threat of violence and warfare, to civilisation and peace (and hence the moral and spiritual development of the human race) increases in the last decades of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century, so do De Morgan's realisation of them become more imminent and substantial.

*S.O.S.*, with its revealing title, clearly signals a crisis in society in terms of the inhumanity of war, but also with reference to the corruption of the soul's expected progression from bestial entity to angelic actuality. Here, the redeeming figure makes a despairing gesture with outstretched arms, averting her gaze from the creatures of the mire, yet above her is a kaleidoscopic rainbow, the dual function of both the Christian iconography of deliverance, but also the prismatic colours, shown by science to combine together to make up pure white light, epitomising the spiritual passage to enlightenment. Paglia argues that Western culture suppresses or denies the atavistic genesis of life from its rudimentary marine origins. She suggests that nineteenth-century art and literature functions through a re-envisioning of civilisation on a trajectory towards perfection, in a mode she terms the Apollonian, which is posited as a male rationality, expressed in desires

to classify, order, and to understand. The Chthonian, however, for Paglia is the counterpoint, representing the barbaric reality of evolution, which is characterised by violence, messiness, and uncontrollable disorder. However deeply buried under a veneer of civilisation in the nineteenth century, the origins of life endure, and emerge through symbolic expression, such as in De Morgan's works. Paglia suggests that Western science in particular tries to negate, or reinvent the materiality of life itself:

[These are] Chthonian realities which Apollo evades, the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long, slow suck, the murk and ooze. It is the dehumanising brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from our consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as persons. Western science and aesthetics are attempts to revise this horror into imaginatively palatable form.<sup>22</sup>

In De Morgan's use of such base prehistoric and imaginary creatures, the binary opposition with the exalted female form is made explicit, and I propose that De Morgan is simultaneously representing the 'reality' of the descent of the human species, as set out by Paglia, drawing attention to their bestial capacity, yet at the same time attempting to reconcile this stark foundation with an enlightened faith in the future, in a utopia navigated by a female pioneer. Indeed, Paglia's analogy of the role of water/fluids in relation to female empowerment correlates to Darwinian evolutionary struggle. In discussing menstruation, Paglia associates Western taboos of the cyclic blood loss with the (male or Apollonian) horror of the very origins of life:

It is not menstrual blood *per se* which disturbs the imagination - unstaunchable though that red flow may be - but rather the albumen in the blood, the uterine shreds, placental jellyfish of the female sea. This is the Chthonian matrix from which we rose. We have an evolutionary revulsion from slime, our site of biologic origins. Every month it is woman's fate to

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<sup>22</sup> C. Paglia, *Sexual Personae, Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, New York and London: Penguin, 1992, p.6.

face the abyss of time and being, the abyss which is herself.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to Paglia's assumption of the female as the horrifying locus of existence and termination, in *S.O.S.*, De Morgan clearly differentiates between the predominantly male beasts and the chaste, sanitised female, effectively removing the female from the mere material confines of life, and raising her status to a divine deity. Although a much more sombre handling of the evolution and spiritual alliance, this painting does still exhibit De Morgan's fundamental belief in the causal relationship between primeval beginnings from the material element of water, and the most elevated aspirations of the human soul.

## 5.2 Awakening Moon: Luna's Power and Spiritual Enlightenment

In De Morgan's personification of the Roman goddess of the moon, *Luna* (1885) [Ill.39], an explicit critique of the containment of women's physical bodies and spiritual confinement is contemplated in the allegorical study of the moon as a female, and pagan, deity. Semi-reclining in a half-moon, over dazzling water and jagged rocks, Luna is draped with loosely knotted rope, thickly wound around her legs, as if to prevent escape. Yet at the same time these ropes are curiously slack, the knots are loose, with the minimum struggle Luna could shake them off. Hovering over the water, and caught between the sky and the sea, Luna represents that conjunction of woman as a set of encoded gender expectations, and also of an idealised relationship to nature, specifically the cyclic and apparently supernatural elements, defining her as Other. Like the water symbolism in De Morgan's work, the moon represents forces in transition, of becoming, as it follows its cycle of waxing and waning. Water is seen as irrevocably bound up with the moon's mysterious cycle, and therefore eternally linked. Notably, the moon is also seen as a binary opposite of the sun, which is characterised by male generative powers. Kestner reads this painting by De Morgan as a feminist statement:

*Luna* [...] is one of the [nineteenth] century's most convincing

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

representations of woman as Artemis/Selene. The female is conceived as a goddess, not swooning over Endymion but aloft on the crescent over the world, the supreme deity of the universe, not dependent on the masculine sun.<sup>24</sup>

Dijkstra points out that in the nineteenth century Havelock Ellis links Darwinian theory to confirm the affiliation of woman and the moon:

Indeed, even science had found justification for the link between woman and the moon. Havelock Ellis, in his *Man and Woman* (1894) pointed out that the “curious resemblance” of a woman’s menstrual cycle “to the lunar cycle was long ago noticed. Most recently Darwin had suggested that the connection between physiological periodicity and the moon was directly formed at a very remote period of zoological evolution, and that the periodicity then impressed upon the organism has survived until the present day.” In a sense, then, woman was a natural child of the moon, of Diana.<sup>25</sup>

The moon is a negative opposite, circumscribed by its dependence on, and inferiority to, the sun. These dual connotations of both positive and negative, masculine and feminine, are inscribed in De Morgan’s striking painting of *Luna*. The painting was exhibited at the Institute of Painters in Oil Colours, 1886/9, accompanied by the sonnet *To the Moon*, by Shelley:

Art thou pale from weariness  
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the Earth  
Wandering companionless

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<sup>24</sup> J. Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny*, London and New York: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, p.110.

<sup>25</sup> B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.122.



Among the stars that have a different birth  
 And ever changing, like a joyless eye  
 That finds no object worth its constancy?

However, De Morgan's personification presents a challenge, like her other images of women in symbolic pose. In presenting Luna as a figure who is bound, yet capable of facilitating her own freedom, she offers a model of choice, of potential for change, rather than a utopian exchange. This is in keeping with the dominant concept in the nineteenth century of the moon as feminine nature or power, a mythological conjunction of life and death, and also with the dramatically changing status of women in the last decades of the century. Examining the feminist movement of this period, Levine notes that for the last decades:

Feminism, in this period [...] signalled the adoption of an alternative set of values. Although many of these still inevitably accorded with the class and ideology in which these women had grown up, they nonetheless offered not a negative and reactive protest, but a celebratory and positive image consonant with the place women demanded for themselves, both within society and for changing it.<sup>26</sup>

In the challenges effected by De Morgan's unconventional representations of traditional subjects, distinguished by the emphasis on female power and freedom, De Morgan's concerns with spiritual growth and enlightenment are echoed by Eliade's observations of the fundamental power symbolised as regenerative powers associated with the moon. In a parallel with De Morgan's celebration of the cyclical nature of woman's reproductive cycle, Eliade argues that archetypal concepts of the moon/woman sustain a deeply held human desire for resurrection:

This perpetual return to its beginnings, and this ever-recurring cycle make the moon *the* heavenly body above others concerned with the rhythms of

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<sup>26</sup> P. Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900*, London: Hutchinson, 1987, p.23.

life. It is not surprising then, that it governs all those spheres of nature that fall under the law of recurring cycles: waters, rain, plant life, fertility.<sup>27</sup>

Lawton Smith sees the moon as a resonant motif in De Morgan's feminist strategies, enabling and embodying the possibility of transition (as in Eliade's notion of the water and moon in 'process'):

The moon acts in De Morgan's images in a very different way: by using women as the personifications, the artist acknowledged the traditional association of the lunar with the feminine, but also removed the pejorative meanings of that associations. Neither completely passive nor perversely threatening - glowing, indistinct, cool, pale, penumbral, transitional between the contrasting states of fully dark and fully light, between the imprisonment of matter and the freedom of spirit - the moon in all its ambiguity becomes a positive metaphor of transformative possibility for De Morgan.<sup>28</sup>

Lawton Smith highlights the importance of the connection between the moon and its myths, and De Morgan's presentation of women and spiritual enlightenment. This reading can be expanded upon by a close analysis of the painting. I propose that De Morgan's strategies assert a feminist critique through the spiritualist intervention between the material and spirit world. De Morgan's moon goddess can be seen to resist the patriarchal notions of insubordination through the curious disjunction created between the implied bondage of the ropes, and the explicit anticipation of potential freedom. This resistance

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<sup>27</sup> M. Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, p.154. Eliade's terminology is striking, as he lists those specific elements of a cyclical nature which Darwin draws upon to demonstrate the principles of evolutionary theory in *Origin of Species*. Indeed, the return to the emphasis on water as the source of all life is essential to Darwin's account, and is echoed in Eliade's discussions, although not always acknowledged.

<sup>28</sup> E. Lawton Smith, unpublished MS, '*Dim is the Light from Beyond*': *The Impact of Spiritualism on Evelyn De Morgan's Nocturnal Imagery*, 1996, p.3. Smith discusses a range of lunar imagery in this chapter, relating it to both themes of confinement and spiritualist impetus.

is duplicated also, in the compositional organisation of the painting, where the body of the reclining goddess is almost entirely confined within the curving disk of the crescent moon, except for the left arm, hand and foot, which, breaking out of the otherwise symmetrical perimeter boundaries of her enclosure, serving to disrupt the harmony of the work by introducing a note of dissonance and discord. This conception, by disrupting the viewer's anticipation of order and symmetry, forces us to confront the dynamic gesture which ruptures the completeness of the crescent, and in turn, draws our attention to the implied division between heaven and earth. The figure of Luna occupies the space almost exactly half-way between the celestial realm and the earthly domain, forming the pivotal axis of the painting itself. As with the martyr figures, discussed in Chapter Three, this pagan female figure represents the intersection of the corporeal and metaphysical, as well as providing a link or bridge to heaven.

In other paintings such as *Sleeping Earth and Wakening Moon* (after 1905) [Ill. 40], the dyadic model of woman and nature is also demonstrated. Earth, which traditionally signifies the maternal, as in 'Mother Earth', is here being supplanted by the moon as night time falls. Again, De Morgan uses the dramatic juxtaposition of water to suggest a primeval setting, where only water, earth, light and dark have yet evolved. Yet the spiritual nature of the possibility of transformation dominates the scene, painted to show the very moment of 'mutation' or exchange from earth divinity to celestial divinity. Here, then, De Morgan presents the intersection of matter and spirit, with the heavy body of earth almost fettered by the sharp pinnacles of rock upon which she appears to be impaled, whereas the ethereal presence of the moon is characterised by movement, light and expression, breaking free from the encircling glow of the moon in which she is enclosed. Lawton Smith notes that the two figures act as mirror-images, with their gestures paralleled and inverted.<sup>29</sup> However, rather than forming a 'tension' suggested by Lawton Smith, I would argue that these dyadic figures forge a convergence between the physicality of matter, represented by the water, and the spiritual freedom offered by the celestial plane, represented by the sky, which functions as a repository of spiritualist themes. The female figures illustrate a paradigm of progression from the earth to the heavens, with the female body facilitating the metamorphosis and spiritual consummation.

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<sup>29</sup> E. Lawton Smith, *ibid.*, p.6.

The unification of heaven and earth through the female is an effective metaphor of spiritual convictions, and this composititional device suggests another focus of De Morgan's works, in its correspondence with the Eastern mythological legacy of the masculine and feminine powers, yin and yang, which will be discussed in this chapter.

For De Morgan, representations of the moon, particularly in conjunction with water, signal a concept of linear progression from the lowest life forms, emanating from the oceans, to the highest forms, residing in the celestial spheres. This is illustrated explicitly in paintings such as *Moonbeams Dipping into the Sea* (c.1900) [Ill.41], of which two versions exist. Here, the three female personifications of moonbeams are visualised as golden-haired young women, resonant of the earlier images of the young Jane Hales. They are angelic in appearance, and De Morgan creates a dynamic composition of the three interlinked figures, which cuts across the diagonal plane of the painting, as they form a linked chain. The lowest bathes in the water, supported by her two sisters. The uppermost woman is curled, like Luna, around the disk of a yellowing moon, her cloak of dusky draperies swirling protectively around the two lower links in the chain. The three figures then, personifying aspects of the moon, also represent the long ladder which must be ascended from barbaric earth to heavenly sky. This is an idea which appears in *The Result of an Experiment*, where a spirit asserts "on earth the ladder is built by which the freed spirit may rise, and the way of building is simple and plain".<sup>30</sup> Another, direct reference to Evelyn's powers as a female medium serve to underpin the concept of a bridge to heaven forged by the women in *Moonbeams*, as an angel addresses Evelyn (referred to as 'N') "as for you, N., with a blind passionate faith in an unseen, unrealised good, you held us and made a bridge by which we could first communicated and then guide your lives".<sup>31</sup> The theme of this painting is primarily optimistic, offering a message of hope and divine passage, through the sense of unity and solidarity established by the linking of the three women in their journey. This theme of theological hope is reiterated in the spirit messages in *The Result of an Experiment*, where spirits urge us to maintain our faith in the afterlife:

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<sup>30</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.74.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68.

Loud above all earthly strains sounds the ringing of the music of the spheres. Pierce upwards through the dim world of undeveloped spirits, grasp the Angel hands that stretch out to you across the grey world of matterful spirit, and rise to the knowledge of growth, and the Heavens of burning light.<sup>32</sup>

The moon appears centrally in the paintings discussed, but also as a peripheral motif in several other works, such as *Medea* (1889), *Helen of Troy* (1898), *The Little Sea Maid* (1887) and *Sleep and Death: The Children of the Night* (1883). In all of these works featuring single figures of women, the moon is painted in its crescent form, in the phase of either waxing or waning. This detail is striking, and supports my reading that De Morgan actively exploits such motifs for their symbolic transformative potential. I suggest that De Morgan incorporates the moon in these works to support a specifically female iconography, often in conjunction with her spiritualist concepts. The perceived magical and cyclical powers of the moon are associated in these paintings with unusual, mediumistic powers of women. In such works then, De Morgan makes a connection between women, water, the occult and an affinity with that traditionally feminine icon, the moon.

The alliance of moon and water imagery in many of De Morgan's paintings may well reveal the influence of Leonardo da Vinci's distinctive lunar and marine backgrounds; yet De Morgan exploits these symbols in order to produce an innovative and challenging scheme of female empowerment and spiritual awakening. In particular, the moon, when central to De Morgan's works in paintings such as *Luna* forms a thematic link between many of her paintings, forging a metaphorical bridge between heaven and water; arcane ancient female power and spiritual illumination.

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<sup>32</sup> E. and W. De Morgan, *The Result of an Experiment*, p.77.

### 5.3 Shells, Water and the Origin of Species

The revision of origins of life, and the assumed progression of both life and the soul, is envisioned by De Morgan and many other late nineteenth-century artists through the striking form of the evolutionary mutation: the mermaid, a bizarre and improbable hybrid of woman and fish. These appear in the works of many artists of the period, in British and French art.

Incorporated into these mythological themes, and also included in many of De Morgan's classically inspired works, such as *Venus and Cupid* (1878) [Ill.42] and *Phosphorus and Hesperus* (1881) [Ill.43], are prolific representations of sea-shore fauna, particularly shells and crustaceans. De Morgan's works are characterised by the Pre-Raphaelite impetus to exhibit 'truth to nature'. This can be seen in the works of artists such as Millais (*Ophelia*, 1852), Brett (*The Stonebreaker*, 1857-8) and Holman Hunt (*The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851), which all demonstrate the Pre-Raphaelite motivation to represent natural phenomena as a moralising element in the human narrative of their works. William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* (1858) [Ill.10] actually anticipates some of De Morgan's themes, including the impact of evolutionary concepts.

Dyce paints a scene at the beach in Pegwell Bay, Kent, in which appear several scattered figures, engrossed in collecting and seeking shells and fossils. The fashion for collecting fossils was entirely due to the scientific climate for classification in natural history, and were displayed for the first time in the new public museums, such as London's Natural History Museum. Darwin refers to the modification evident in shells in his analysis of geomorphic changes over vast periods of earth's existence<sup>33</sup>, and Wallace notes the importance of shells in the search for evolutionary evidence through geology, arguing that the types, relations, and location of shells provide "evidence of the origin of new forms".<sup>34</sup>

Shells, along with fossils, became a symbol of both modernity and its integral links

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<sup>33</sup> C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, pp.233-234.

<sup>34</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism*, pp.381-391.

to an inconceivably ancient, evolving past. This painting has been described as “melancholy” in character, although “one of the most popular of all nineteenth-century landscapes”.<sup>35</sup> The pale, monochrome colour-scheme, and the strangely static gestures of the figures create a sense of disturbing tension, amplified by the inclusion of what was considered by many in the nineteenth-century to be a significant supernatural event, the passing of Donati’s comet. Concurrent with the implication of foreboding, however, Dyce’s painting can also be seen as a acknowledgment of scientific empiricism, manifested in both subject-matter of shell and fossil collection, and also in Dyce’s actual technique of intense illusionistic realism in the work, which has often been compared to a photographic or documentary likeness. As with De Morgan’s approach, Dyce’s work is characterised by this curious amalgamation of scientific endeavour in the representation of observable physical ‘evidence’ in the form of rocks and shells in the scheme of a seascape, but both he and De Morgan are also concerned with symbolic or metaphysical levels of contemplation, particularly with regard to theology and a preoccupation with death. Unlike De Morgan works, however, Dyce’s *Pegwell Bay* does not ultimately offer a sense of redemption or of hope. Instead Dyce’s work only presents contemporary concerns about the origins and purpose of life and death, without attempting to answer those questions raised.

De Morgan’s works carry the hope of resurrection, and therefore have closer affiliations with the writings of the scientist/spiritualist Wallace, rather than with more realist-inclined artists of the period. When summing up a section on shells and fossils as empirical evidence for proving evolution, Wallace writes:

If evolution is true, there ought to have been, on the whole, progression in all the chief types of life. The higher and more specialised forms should have come into existence later than the lower and more generalised forms, [...] they ought to show us broadly that such a progressive evolution has taken place. We have seen that in some special groups [shells and fossils]

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<sup>35</sup> C. Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981, p.85.

such a progression is clearly visible.<sup>36</sup>

It is this movement towards complexity and higher faculties which De Morgan equates with her interpretation of the development of the human soul. This is carefully traced out in her paintings by the corresponding references to those elements of the natural world, such as shells and sea-water, which also have associations with the spiritual world.

The Pre-Raphaelite obligation to represent nature in all its detail is one of the distinguishing characteristics in De Morgan's works, linking her work in terms of style with Pre-Raphaelite concerns, rather than the less prescriptive terms of Symbolist art. In De Morgan's works, this meticulous reproduction of still-life forms was achieved through detailed anatomical study and draughtsmanship at the Slade School of Art, but also consolidated by many visits to the coast where shells and the seaside proved fascinating subjects for De Morgan. She sketched and studied shells at length, an activity she took seriously on holiday visits where she notes that she "had about 2 hours work before breakfast, afterwards worked till 11 [sketched] shells on the beach till 12, drew a little".<sup>37</sup>

Shells, like water, form part of a symbolism which is deployed by De Morgan as metaphoric allusions to life, death and rebirth. Incorporated into the 'feminine' associations attributed to water, shells, and in turn, their yield of pearls, generate a specific set of meanings which are shared, according to Eliade, in a cross-cultural consensus:

Oysters, sea-shells, the snail and the pearl figure constantly in aquatic cosmology as well as in sexual symbolism. They all participate [...] in the sacred powers which are concentrated emblems of these forces for a variety of reasons - the resemblance between the marine shell and the genital organs of woman, the gynaecological and embryological symbolism of the pearl formed within the oyster.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism*, p.397.

<sup>37</sup> E. De Morgan, *Diary*, 2 August, 1871, DMFA.

<sup>38</sup> M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p.125.



Within the generic subject of water symbolism, De Morgan's specific and repetitive use of shells and pearls endorses her focus on spiritual and cosmological themes, with particular emphasis on those myths and symbols which present a soteriological female utopia or vision. Also, as Eliade points out here, the signification of immortality is, here, inextricably bound up with female anatomy, and reproductive potential, reinforcing those associations of fluidity and incubation presupposed by marine and aquatic environment in general. Thus both strands of De Morgan's work are incorporated in the representation of motifs and symbolism of the soul, producing connotations of the immortal, evolving soul, and a resourceful deployment of traditional emblems of female sexuality in order to venerate female potency.

In *Venus and Cupid* (1878), another of De Morgan's early works chosen for exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1878, the observant attention to painting numerous shells and marine objects is striking. The adult figure of Venus is flanked by an adolescent Cupid, standing together on an isolated seashore. Composed in the more formal, classical style of painting, nevertheless this painting illustrates De Morgan's fascination and preoccupation with the motifs of water and shells, which dominate the fore- and middle-ground of the work. In Greek mythology, Aphrodite (later Venus) form part of the narratives of metamorphosis, and, born from the foam of the ocean, is inextricably connected with its regenerative power and associations. Walter Crane also chose Venus as a subject at around the same time as De Morgan's version, painting a version of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* in 1877, which was shown at the same Grosvenor Gallery exhibition. Like De Morgan, Crane was a supporter of the suffrage movement.<sup>39</sup> As an artist, he believed that art could convey political as well as moral messages, and "he was chiefly responsible for revitalising the ideal woman of Pre-Raphaelite imagery and adapting her to the iconography of socialism"<sup>40</sup>. His version of Venus, as a commanding female figure, has similarities with De Morgan's iconisation of a prototypical female. It

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Crane (1845-1915) worked with Sylvia Pankhurst in the WSPU, and was a member of the Social Democratic Federation, the Hammersmith League, and the Fabian Society.

<sup>40</sup> L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1987, p.32.

is possible that the two artists discussed the symbolism in their works, as they were friends.<sup>41</sup> The two paintings also develop the association of the sea with life, death and rebirth, and the goddess Venus. Botticelli's painting was considered relevant to the nineteenth-century art world, where Venus is "a character of loveliness and energy, with his [Botticelli's] consciousness of the shadow upon it of the great things from which it shrinks".<sup>42</sup> Pater's remark is similar to his account of the *Mona Lisa*, perpetuating the contemporary symbolic affiliation of women and water to life and death.

Venus is the central figure in both Botticelli's and Crane's paintings, and dominates the setting, as does De Morgan's Venus. However, as well as the implied significance of marine origins, *Venus and Cupid* provides an unusual treatment of its characters, demonstrating the complex nature of De Morgan's engagement with existing and conventional myths and artistic repertoire. Cupid, the son of Venus, is almost always portrayed as a cherubic and mischievous child, but in De Morgan's work, he is unusually portrayed as a young adult. In Greek mythology, it is at this stage of late adolescence that Cupid falls in love with Psyche, against his mother's wishes. Psyche later becomes the personification of the soul, and their union condoned. In *Venus and Cupid* then, De Morgan explores the relationship between these two competing deities of love and passion. The figures stand close, arms entwined like lovers. Cupid gazes beseechingly at his mother Venus, whilst she looks away, remote and aloof from her surroundings. The fraught posture of Cupid, and the symbolism of the numerous shells and calm sea-water suggests a close link with female sexuality and power, borne out by the narrative, where Cupid is torn by his desire for Psyche and love for Venus. The minutely-observed shells which litter the sand are echoed in the delicate shades of peach and pink robes worn by Venus. Moreover, the loosely tied sash of darker peach material winds around Venus in a pattern which corresponds to the striation of the shells at her feet, strengthening the integration of female sexuality and seashells. Venus is the figure of authority, standing amongst those marine elements from which she draws her potency. Her body is boldly

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<sup>41</sup> This friendship is briefly referred to by Stirling. Discussing De Morgan's *Ceres Mourning for Persephone*, Stirling notes that "it was a favourite picture of Walter Crane." *Pictures, etc., already purchased in details*, Entry no. 13, DMFA.

<sup>42</sup> W. Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.39.

delineated, facing directly out to the viewer, yet withdrawn from our gaze. Cupid, on the other hand, stands sideways on to the viewer, and is placed in the position of supplicant to an inflexible Venus.

A type of seashell is named the Aphrodite shellfish, also known as the conch, directly referring to the genesis of Venus/Aphrodite from the ocean. It also has cultural and mythological connotations of female sexuality and reproductive organs. This shell is reproduced in several of De Morgan's paintings, and has specific resonance in an iconographical reading of such works, as Eliade observes:

The resemblance of the marine shell to the female genital organ was doubtless known to the Greeks also. The birth of Aphrodite in a conch was an illustration of the mystical relations between the goddess and what she symbolised; and it was this symbolism of birth and of regeneration that inspired the ritual function of shells.<sup>43</sup>

Eliade also consolidates the alliance of woman/shell/immortality to the Venus myth, where he argues that:

It is thanks to their [shells] creative power - as emblems of the universal matrix - that shells play their part in funerary rites. Such a symbolism of regeneration does not easily fade away; the scallop shell symbolising the resurrection on so many funerary monuments passed over into Christian art. Often, moreover, the dead woman is associated with Venus; she is represented on the sarcophagus with the breast bared and the dove at her feet, by thus *identifying herself with the archetype of life in perpetual renewal*, the deceased woman is ensuring her own resurrection.<sup>44</sup> (My italics).

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<sup>43</sup> M Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, p.131.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

With reference to De Morgan's choice of subject-matter in this painting, an intricate interconnection of themes can now be identified, fundamentally underpinned by the concepts of life and death. Venus is primarily associated with love. This too, is reflected in the shells painted by De Morgan, as the sea shell, pearl, and spiral shape of shells, favoured by the artist, are considered to be emblems of love, marriage and fecundity.

In painting the specialised minutiae of natural sea life forms, and then locating these figures from mythology firmly amongst them, De Morgan negotiates contemporary themes; assimilating the relationship between religious beliefs and narratives of ancient legend. These concerns are explored in other paintings, notably *Phosphorus and Hesperus* (1881), which like *Venus and Cupid* was also exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery (1882). Stylistically, the two paintings are very similar. In both works, the serene blue and turquoise tones dominate the works, as well as the compositional and spatial parallels in sea/sky ratio which occupy the middle- and background, and the sand/shells/figures in the foreground. However, whilst *Venus and Cupid* clearly belongs to the classical tradition, the forms of Phosphorus and Hesperus represent a subversive challenge to their classical origins, which can be related to De Morgan's agenda of the spiritual realm united to the earthly. Phosphorus, which means 'bringer of Light' is also goddess of birth, and, is frequently, as here, shown as a herald of the dawn. Hesperus is the personification of the evening star. These figures then already existed in literary sources, yet De Morgan presents them in an innovative and challenging manner. The original female models of Phosphorus and Hesperus are reversed by De Morgan who presents them instead as alluring adolescent males. Both being deities of light, these goddesses were also regarded as deities of birth and reproduction. De Morgan is overtly transgressing the boundaries of gender as established in the original Greek narrative, and subverting expectations of these traditional female/male protagonists. The figures of the two young men almost compose a circle, through their convoluted, integrated posture; the circle disrupted by the symmetrical mirroring position of the thrusting torches, one raised to the sky, the other collapsing to the earth. A calm ocean and unbroken horizon frames the upper bodies, and the sand, complete with an apparently haphazard scattering of shells, fills the space around the lower body. This has the effect of dividing the space into the elemental components of earth, water and sky. Again, the shells feature as central constituents, painted with as

much care and attention to detail as the central subjects of the painting, elevating these shells to the status of icons or emblems.

Homoerotic overtones are unmistakable here, firstly in terms of the strategy of exchanging the orthodox sex of the characters, and secondly in the challenge to the dominant artistic convention of painting only female nudes. The sensual, trademark pearlescent colouring of flesh-tones, the idealised anatomy, and the complex poses which fill the frame, draw the viewers' eyes to rove across the canvas, from the horizontal to the vertical axis, in scopophilic pleasure usually associated with the high art paradigm of the classical female nude, made popular in the nineteenth century by British artists such as Leighton and Alma Tadema. The innovative device of transposing the established gender of these particular deities is striking, as it signals a symbol of hope, expressed, unusually by De Morgan, through the male body, albeit in idealised form. However, these are youths, not assured, and potentially threatening, adult males. As adolescent youths, they could occupy the same limited category as children and the female sex in the nineteenth century. This reading is underpinned by the sexualised motifs of shells and water, from which birth, regeneration and transformation are all possible. The notion of an androgynous sexuality, harbouring principles of both male and female, is explored with particular effect in the work of Burne-Jones, and also in some of De Morgan's angels. This theme of gender ambivalence is borne out by the inclusion of the torches. These have conspicuous phallic connotations, in the configuration of thrusting gestures, yet they are also emblems of fertility and birth. Phosphorus, carrying a torch, is associated with Hecate, the High Priestess of the Occult, who is frequently depicted bearing a torch, adding a further possible occult reading to this painting.<sup>45</sup>

*Phosphorus and Hesperus* develops De Morgan's interest in Eastern mythology, suggested in the striking circular pose of the boys. By portraying morning and evening stars, De Morgan is also drawing upon the Chinese cosmology of Yin and Yang, which tells of the dyadic, binary universe of mutually dependent positive and negative principles.

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<sup>45</sup> R. Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.367. Bell also notes the link with the occult "from this association with the queen of the underworld, she herself became identified with the infernal regions[...] ruling over the souls of the departed [...] as a kind of queen of witches, high priestess of the occult". pp.217-218.

In this mythology, Yin is female; symbolising the earth, darkness, the moon and passivity. Yang is male, heaven and light, the sun, the active principle in nature. This is the conventional model of Yin and Yang, but in De Morgan's conception, the male and female principles have been inverted, transposed and reconfigured, to produce an iconoclastic version of these fundamental cosmological precepts. In this painting, De Morgan shifts the emphasis away from the individual concerns of the female or male sex, instead combining features of both to suggest a spiritual balance. The emblems and motifs in the painting serve to support this reading, resonant with symbolic imagery of fecundity, regeneration, and spiritual harmony. The figures in the painting are, in their nakedness, subsumed into the wider significance of natural elements; the marine landscape and its contents. The generality of the sea-shore location itself is offset against De Morgan's meticulous depictions of exotic shells, from the snail shell, with the circular form of its shell symbolising cosmic regeneration, to the scallop, with its references to rebirth and purity.

Of De Morgan's paintings which feature the sea, most include a conspicuous collection of shells. Subject such as *The Christian Martyr* (1882), and *Sleep and Death: Children of the Night* (1883), all manifest De Morgan's interest in shell iconography which develops the wider connotations of water imagery. The nineteenth-century concern with shells in terms of evolutionary themes occurs in both in De Morgan's works, and in contemporary debate, expressed by Pater in 1893:

Think, for a moment, of the difference, as regards mental attitude, between the naturalist who deals with things through ideas and the layman (so to call him) in picking up a shell on the sea-shore; what it is that the subsumption of the individual into the species, its subsequent alliance to and co-ordination with other species, really does for the furnishing of the mind of the former.<sup>46</sup>

Like Pater, De Morgan exploits the connotations and iconography of shells to illustrate the current interest in shells within the broad framework of philosophical and intellectual questioning, itself galvanised and generated by new scientific discoveries of evolutionary

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<sup>46</sup> W. Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, pp. 142-3.

patterns. The driving preoccupation with water and its yield signals De Morgan's interest in finding ways to integrate the exchange between evolutionary science and a developing soul. Moreover, De Morgan exploits elements of natural science in order to develop her concept of transformative potential through the female form.

#### 5.4 The Little Mermaid and her Sisters

The mermaid and the siren are popular figures in myth and legend, and proliferate in the nineteenth century:

[Mankind] has been fascinated by the mermaid; by her eternal youth; her strange, unnatural beauty, her allure; and by the mysterious ocean in which she dwells [...] the *femme fatale* of the sea; she lures man to his destruction, and usually he goes unresisting to his doom.<sup>47</sup>

The mermaid, then, according to this description, is the locus of competing and contradictory symbolism; she becomes either a fetishised part-object, divided into beast/woman, or comes to represent a narcissistic dream of plenitude, implied by the reflected gaze of the mermaid into the sea, or into the mirror with which she is often painted. In the nineteenth century, the mermaid inhabits a principal location in literature, art, and also science, which makes her a figure of cultural significance. In literature and art, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the mermaid, or siren, is portrayed in a plethora of images. In 1882, Jane Harrison remarks upon the conflation of the mermaid with metaphysical forces, in *Myths of the Odyssey in Literature and Art*, in an examination of the influence of Homer's writings on contemporary art and literature. She points out that sirens are "all the more haunting, the more beguiling because [they are] shrouded in

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<sup>47</sup> G. Benwell, *Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and her Kin*, London: Hutchinson, 1960, p.13.

mystery, the mystery of the hidden things of the sea".<sup>48</sup>

Existing in two polarities, the mermaid appears as a romantic *femme-fatale*: a mythological creature of great beauty, or irresistible voice, luring sailors to their doom. The mermaid also has strong links with the occult, and specifically with witches. In *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and Sailors* (1885), Bassett devotes a whole chapter to the occult power of the mermaid/witch as "Storm Raisers".<sup>49</sup> She was also the subject of scientific research and interest, with many recorded eyewitness accounts, supported by an argument that the mermaid represents either a missing link in Darwin's evolutionary model, or is the product of a human/fish hybrid; again drawing upon the framework of scientific classification of species, sexuality and reproduction. Finally, the mermaid, who is neither fish, nor human, is denied the immortal soul of the human being, and is destined to live her life as a low form of primeval life, and upon her death, simply ceases to exist, and returns to the waves from which she came. The story of *Undine*, originally written by Paracelsus, and reworked by Fredrich de la Motte Fouqué (1843), relates the tale of a woman who is also an aquatic spirit, and like the mermaid is destined to dissolve into nothingness. It is this fear of nothingness, of the random pointlessness of existence, in part compounded by Darwinist theories of evolution, which creates the impetus for nineteenth-century spiritualists to incorporate evolution of species into a narrative of the soul's progression. The concept of the mermaid or siren as symbol of seduction is countered by the emphasis on immortality and its lack:

The same themes recur over much of the globe: the desire of the mermaid from the Christian era onwards for a soul; her power of prophecy and of granting wishes; the vengeance she wreaks if injured or thwarted; and her occasional sojourn on land with a mortal husband.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> J. Harrison, *Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature*, London: Rivingtons, 1889, p.149.

<sup>49</sup> F. Bassett, "The Storm Raisers" in *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors*, London: Sampson Low, 1885.

<sup>50</sup> G. Benwell, *Sea Enchantress*, p.13.



This portrayal of the soul-less mermaid, destined to return to very elements in death which also sustain her in life, provides inspiration for many artists of the nineteenth century, but is of particular relevance to De Morgan's own spiritualist objective to portray an immortal soul through a female deity. As a subject for painting, the mermaid was seen as both an example of feminine charm and allure, but also as a legitimate subject of scientific enquiry. The *Magazine of Art*, 1883, notes that "the Mermaiden is certainly the prettiest and most popular of all the myths of natural history [...] there is no end to her metamorphoses, and none to her charm".<sup>51</sup> The literature describing, documenting, discussing and representing the mermaid in the latter half of the nineteenth century is extensive, a testament to an enduring fascination with sea mythology.

The fish/woman symbiosis has a long genesis in mythological literature. However, in the nineteenth century, the mermaid was discussed in typically more scientific terms of reference. A contemporary anthropologist notes that the concept of the fish-symbol, although incorporated in Christian iconography, actually has ancient origins and meanings, as "[the fish] doubtless bore also, the older meanings of preservation and reproduction, of which the fish was symbol, and betokened a belief in a future resurrection, as Noah was preserved to dwell in, and populate a new world".<sup>52</sup> This immediately suggests a correspondence with De Morgan's use of older, Pre-Christian myths and emblems, particularly those which represent themes of resurrection and immortality.

The set of three paintings inspired by the Hans Christian Andersen tale of *The Little Mermaid* actually conform to an evolutionary progression of species, beginning with the primeval origins of humans species from a rudimentary marine genealogy, represented by the fish/woman figures seen in *The Sea Maidens*<sup>53</sup> (1885-6) [Ill.44 ] proceeding into human, material status, seen in *The Little Sea Maid* (1886-8) [Ill.45], and culminating in the highest expression of development, that of the attainment of an immortal soul, soaring

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<sup>51</sup> *Magazine of Art*, 1883, p.220, quoted in L. Nead, "Woman as Temptress: the Siren and the Mermaid in Victorian Painting", *Leeds Art Calendar*, 1982, No.91, p.5.

<sup>52</sup> H. Lee, *Sea Fables Explained*, London: William Clowes, 1883, p.11. The frontispiece of this book lists Lee's scientific qualifications, giving the subsequent text scientific authority.

<sup>53</sup> Referred to by Stirling as *The Five Mermaids*.

into the celestial sphere, in *Daughters of the Mist* (n.d.) [Ill.46 ]. Indeed, feminist theorists have argued for just such an articulation in the feminist struggle for a utopian future. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray asserts:

Once we have left the waters of the womb, we have to construct a space for ourselves in the air for the rest of our time on earth, air in which we can breathe and sing freely, in which we can perform and move at will. Once we were fishes. It seems we are destined to become birds.<sup>54</sup>

De Morgan's appropriation of the mermaid and her aquatic origins, based on ancient mythology and symbolism, is utilised in the production of themes and motifs of female empowerment, particularly with reference to spiritual illumination. Irigaray's words suggest that for a feminist, language of emancipation and even explanation, the mermaid and marine iconography offer a model of transformation which is both liberating and at the same time, still tied to the language and paradigms of nineteenth-century scientific dialogue. Indeed, De Morgan's portrayal of the mermaid's progression into the immortal afterlife with *The Daughters of the Air*, the metaphor of birds and flight is central, as the group of women who welcome the metamorphosed mermaid, float in a cloud of rainbow-tinted ether. Moreover, in *Legends of the Sea*, Bassett remarks that "birds, as inhabitants of the air, and long supposed to commune with angels, were naturally chosen as oracles".<sup>55</sup> This pervasive symbolism linking birds and angels, of seers and immortality, provides a connection for De Morgan's trilogy of quest-for-the-soul paintings, underpinning her agenda of feminist and spiritualist concerns. The nineteenth-century enthusiasm for scientific observation and recording natural history would appear to preclude the metaphysical. However, the expanding interest in taxonomy of species led scientists and naturalists to speculate on the possibility of the existence of a mermaid creature. Lee, whilst maintaining a sceptical distance, considers several examples of contemporary debate:

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<sup>54</sup> L. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans.) G. Gill, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p.66.

<sup>55</sup> F. Bassett, *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea*, p.132.

Mr Swainson, a naturalist of deserved eminence, has maintained on purely scientific grounds, that there must exist a marine animal uniting the general form of a fish with that of a man; that by the laws of Nature the natatorial type of the Quadrumana is most assuredly wanting, and that, apart from man; a being connecting the seals with the monkeys is required to complete the circle of quadrumanous animals.<sup>56</sup>

The mermaid, or siren becomes the repository of specific scientific and religious themes in the late nineteenth century, proposing unsettling concepts of the delineation between animal and human, and also between male and female:

Above all, the Sirens are a hybrid: half woman, half animal, or better still, feminine divinities who are also part of the animal order. Two identities co-exist, a double nature. They are halved beings with the prerogatives of both their components, irrational entities, perpetually provocative and disturbing.<sup>57</sup>

The concept of a hybrid in the nineteenth century is drawn from both mythological archetypes, and consolidated by the scientific and evolutionary observations on hybridity. Darwin argues that hybrids are an anomaly in evolutionary processes, as:

The sterility of hybrids could not possibly be of any advantage to them, and therefore could not have been acquired by the continued preservation of successive degrees of sterility [...] Pure species have [...] their organs of reproduction in a perfect condition [...] hybrids, on the other hand, have their reproductive organs functionally impotent.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> H. Lee, *Sea Fables Explained*, p.36.

<sup>57</sup> M. Lao, *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction*, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1998, p.11.

<sup>58</sup> C. Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p.199.

Indeed, the anomalous, perverse character of the hybrid became a major concern in fin-de-siècle art and literature. Artists such as Rodin focussed on hybrid characteristics emphasising the natural combined with the unnatural, and these concepts link directly with the prolific imagery of the mermaid in the late nineteenth century.

The mermaid mythology also functions within a particular framework of nineteenth-century scientific language, including that of classification and empirical observation, yet equally feeds into concepts of femininity, by assuming a correlation between the sea, reproduction, and immortality. Myths, deriving from folktales, often serve a didactic function related to their culture. The popular stories of Hans Christian Andersen which were published in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century include such moralising tales as *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *The Little Match Girl* and *The Little Mermaid*. Published between 1835 and 1872, the latter tale was translated into English in 1846, and became an essential nursery tale.

In common with many of her contemporaries, De Morgan painted several versions with mermaids as subject. The competing themes surrounding mermaids in the second-half of the century have resonance for De Morgan's development. She painted two twin pictures, *The Little Sea Maid* and *The Sea Maidens* which she intended should be hung together. These paintings are referred to by Stirling, who notes that:

Evelyn De Morgan had been persuaded to have an Exhibition of her pictures in Bruton Street. There her work had attracted considerable attention, and, among other purchasers, Lord Lovelace had bought a beautiful little picture illustrative of the Five Mermaids in the Fairy Tale by Hans Christian Andersen, a sequel to one she had painted previously as the solitary 'Little Sea Maid who loved the Prince'.<sup>59</sup>

The importance of these paintings being seen as counterparts is emphasised by Stirling, who, when referring to another set of parallel works, *Helen of Troy* and *Cassandra* (1898), which were sold and subsequently separated, writes that "Evelyn De Morgan always said she would never paint twin pictures again, as they always become

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<sup>59</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.248.

separated".<sup>60</sup> The conscious decision to paint these scenes as twin paintings, which were intended to be hung together, draws upon some interesting concepts which directly relate to water as a medium with special powers. The sea, and water in general, is a device used in many paintings to represent a mirror-image, seen for example, in Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus* (1898), and the mirror itself is often painted as an accoutrement of the mermaid's perceived narcissism. In the case of these sister paintings, each painting acts as a mirror of the other, reflecting and interplaying meanings, which are contained separately, and also together, as part of a narrative development. A mirror, real, or metaphorical, serves as a transitional device through which the subject of the painting, the mermaids, and the viewer, can pass into other states of consciousness, into other realms, particularly the of the spiritual. The mirror, or reflected gaze, can function then like a scientific microscope, directing our gaze and reproducing a microcosm of the cosmos, and however it appears superficially to be the same, is always minutely disordered: the same, but different, and through the inversions and distortions of reflection, opens up new vistas and implications. Bhabha suggests that "mimicry is a desire for a reformed recognisable Other, as a subject of difference which is the same, but not quite".<sup>61</sup> This mirroring works in three ways in De Morgan's works: in the use of water as reflective and translucent material; in the mirroring effect of the twinning of the paintings; and finally in the symbolic connotations of the mermaid gazing with admiration into a hand mirror. These mirroring effects are striking, as they serve to disrupt the viewer's sense of continuity, replacing it instead with a series of refracted mirages, which are in a state of flux between each of the related paintings. In the mermaid series, the relationship between the paintings is both contiguous, but also disturbingly distinct. It is my contention that this unsettling relationship is created by the divergence of the spiritual status of the two sets of mermaids. The Little Mermaid earns her immortal, human soul through self-sacrifice, whilst the five sisters, who come to the surface to mourn the loss of their sister, are always separated from her by the translucent barrier of water, condemned to remain within it in the finality of their soul-lessness. However, as Yates argues, there are three parts to

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<sup>60</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *Pictures, etc., already purchased in details*, Entry no.9, DMFA.

<sup>61</sup>H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p.86.

complete this set of paintings, with the final part being *Daughters of the Mist*.<sup>62</sup> These works, completed just before Evelyn and William's marriage, are directly inspired by the Andersen tale, as Stirling comments that *The Sea Maidens* "has the quotation on it in Danish [...] put by Countess Lovelace from the Fairytale by Hans Andersen".<sup>63</sup> The Countess of Lovelace, a fellow Slade student and life-long friend of De Morgan, purchased the painting for £105 at the Bruton Gallery exhibition in 1906. These paintings were evidently works favoured by De Morgan, as they appeared at the New Gallery, 1892; the Walker Gallery, 1893; the Institute of Painters in Oil Colours, 1886/7, as well as featuring individually at other exhibitions, including the Bruton Gallery, 1906, and the large De Morgan exhibition at the Wolverhampton Gallery, 1907.

The story of *The Little Mermaid* describes the longing of the youngest mermaid to gain an immortal soul through the love she bears for a mortal Prince, whose life she saved after a shipwreck. In order to exchange her fish-tail, the signifier of her hybridity and difference, for human legs, the mermaid must sacrifice her voice to the Sea Witch. She can walk, but the Witch curses her "that every step you will take will be like treading upon such sharp knives you would think your blood must flow".<sup>64</sup> Should the Prince fall in love with another, the Witch tells the mermaid that her heart will break on the following morning, and she will dissolve back into the foam of the sea. The mermaid is unable to murder her rival for the Prince's affections, and thus renounces her last chance to return to her life as a mermaid, and live out their allotted span of three hundred years. However, finally the mermaid is given a reprieve, and is rewarded for her self-sacrifice and love, with the gift of an immortal soul. She is welcomed into the celestial realm by the daughters of the air, where her soul will exist forever in the light. The story has close parallels with the story of Christ, and indeed, the orthodox messianic figure which is transposed into a female deity, as I have shown, is central to De Morgan's exploration of spiritual symbolism.

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<sup>62</sup> P. Yates, "Evelyn De Morgan's use of Literary sources in her paintings" in (ed.) C. Gordon, *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, p.61.

<sup>63</sup> A.M.W. Stirling, *Pictures, etc.*, Note added after Entry no. 7, DMFA.

<sup>64</sup> H.C. Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, London and New Jersey: Diluthium Press, 1846; repr. 1996, p.27.

The sea maiden of De Morgan's painting is sitting on a rock, gazing sadly into the sea to which she can never return. In the tale, she goes to the sea each night to cool her painful feet, and it is this moment of private introspection which De Morgan visualises: "at night, when others throughout the prince's palace slept, she would go and sit on the broad marble steps, for it cooled her burning feet to bathe them in the sea water. It was then that she thought of those below in the deep" (*The Little Mermaid*, p.32.). The viewer is therefore placed in the position of confidante, sharing an intimate moment of loss and isolation. De Morgan's choice of this particular moment in the story focuses on the price the mermaid has paid for her sacrifice to love, and her concomitant entry into the mortal, earthly realm from her sea origins. Andersen specifies the age of the mermaids, who were confined to the safety of the seabed until the age of fifteen by their father. It is only at this age that the father allows his daughters to rise to the surface to view the land and sky inhabited by mortals. The specificity of the mermaid's coming-of-age passage to the sea's surface is surely a covert reference to the transition of the female at this age from pre-pubescent 'innocence' to sexual awakening and maturity, signalled in the female by the onset of menstruation. The curse of bleeding feet, which occurs at the moment of bifurcation from the unitary fish-tail (suggestive of the intactness of virginity) to human legs, can be read as a menstrual metaphor, relating to the nineteenth-century term for menstruation as the 'curse', associated with pain and loss. Andersen's narrative echoes the biblical representation of the female sex, and woman's role in the expulsion from Paradise, where Eve is told "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16).

The story of the mermaid focuses on two principal elements: the morphology of species in physiological terms, and the quest for an immortal soul. The nineteenth-century concern with death and the afterlife is expressed by Andersen in a dialogue between the mermaid and her grandmother:

The term of their [human] life is even shorter than ours. We can live to be three hundred years old. But when we cease to be here, we shall only be changed into foam [...] and our souls are not immortal; we shall never

enter upon a new life [...] Human beings, on the contrary, have a soul that lives eternally [...] that rises up through the clear, pure air to the bright stars above! (*The Little Mermaid*, pp.19-20).

The mermaid, longing to join the prince in the earthly domain, declares that she would give up all her years of life, to be able to “have the hope of sharing in the joys of the heavenly world” (*The Little Mermaid*, p.20). This story is particularly pertinent to De Morgan’s own quest to prove the immortality of the soul, expressed firstly in her experiments with spirit contact through automatic writing, and then consolidating her experiences as a spiritualist medium through the predominantly optimistic themes of the existence and progress of the soul in her paintings.

Other aspects of this story also suggest its appeal to De Morgan. It can be seen to function as a contemporary analogy of female subjectivity under patriarchy, describing the confining expectations of the role of women in society. The loss of the mermaid’s voice has both a literal and figurative significance, in relation to the struggle for women’s equality, and an equal voice in public life. The mermaid is also the object of exchange between the male figures of the story; her father and the young Prince. This exchange between father and husband is inscribed in De Morgan’s painting, as she is placed at the junction between sea and land, with the castle behind her and the sea before her. Both the castle and the sea take on anthropomorphic qualities: the lights of the castle are reminiscent of watching eyes, surveillance, culture and regulation, and the sea represents the antithesis of these ideas, of chaos, and a primeval reminder of the maternal functions of life and death itself. Echoing the biblical role of Eve and the thirst for knowledge followed by punishment, the mermaid’s curiosity for knowledge and transformation is seen as a transgressive act which requires the imposition of limitations. At the price of vocal articulation, pain and the precipitation of the menstrual cycle, the mermaid also enters the cycle of resurrection and rebirth, where the womb symbolises a cosmological matrix of eternal regeneration, but also, conversely, through the menstrual cycle, a constant reminder of the incubatory powers of water and the rudimentary origins of life itself.

The metamorphosis of the mermaid from a seabed-dwelling fish hybrid to a human woman, and then to an enlightened soul presents an interpretation of Darwin’s process of



evolution itself: from fish to human being and then soul, expressed through the female body. Andersen's tale represents a deeply-held longing for immortality which corresponds precisely with the themes of spiritualists in the 1880s onwards. Like the evolutionary paradigm, which unconsciously underpins the transition of the mermaid in Andersen's story, Wallace argues for a parallel development of the soul in all humans:

The essential teaching of Spiritualism is that we are all of us [...] build[ing] up a mental and spiritual nature which will be far more complete after the death of the body than it is now; just as this mental fabric is well or ill built, so will our progress and happiness be aided or retarded.<sup>65</sup>

The choice of the fable of *The Little Mermaid* is entirely appropriate for De Morgan's continual exploration of the soul's progression, serving as both a popular contemporary literary theme, and also as a prototype of spiritual evolution. The analogy between metamorphosis and resurrection is a correlating theme in many of De Morgan's works, but is particularly effective in the symbolism of the mermaid in the Andersen narrative. This set of paintings is directly inspired by the tale, yet, as I have shown, the mermaid in the nineteenth century was also incorporated into aspects of scientific investigation, European mythology, and in the spiritualist doctrine of an evolving soul. The mermaid trilogy of works exist as part of De Morgan's broader interest in water imagery. She exploits such allusions to construct potent motifs of regeneration and female divinity, but, significantly, presents this through a system of linear progression which is harnessed to prevailing interpretations of Darwin's evolution of species. In a personal translation of Darwinian ideas, De Morgan demonstrates the fundamental impetus which informs almost all her works from the late 1870s onwards: the quest for immortality, and the evolution of the soul.

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<sup>65</sup> A.R. Wallace, "If a Man die, shall he live again?", in *Light*, 9 July, 1887, p.309.

## Conclusion

To my mind, the Art of the day and the Supernaturalism of the day both hinge on Spiritualism.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis set out to establish the extent to which spiritualism and science inform the works of Evelyn De Morgan. The output of this important woman artist has, up until now, only been briefly examined within the general context of nineteenth-century spiritualism, however, in my research, I have established specific links between De Morgan and the London Spiritualist Alliance, and its important publication, *Light*. I have also considered De Morgan's involvement in spiritualist practices, particularly as spirit-medium practising automatic communications. I have shown that spiritualism itself, from its inauguration in Britain in the 1840s through key intellectual figures such as Sophia De Morgan, constantly sought to define itself through the expanding rationalist paradigm which framed science, incorporating key themes, debates, and even scientific language, in order to substantiate and endorse the fundamental spiritualist belief in the existence of an afterlife and the development of the soul. Particular strands of science are appropriated into spiritualist rhetoric; notably Darwinian evolutionary theory. In Chapter Two, and subsequently, I have demonstrated that Darwin's hypothesis is actually accommodated in spiritualist language of the late nineteenth-century, and that these ideas influenced De Morgan's portrayal of the development of the soul. Evolutionary theories discussed in *Light* in the late nineteenth century were appropriated by De Morgan to provide 'evidence' of a rationalist model of spiritual development which appears in many of her works.

De Morgan's background and education ensured both a privileged position as an artist of independent income, yet also served to define the social expectations that segregated the sexes. De Morgan's surviving diary is a testimony to the frustrations of domestic distractions that thwarted her desire to paint without interruption, as well as prefiguring key aspects of her aspirations to paint for posterity, which contribute to the

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<sup>1</sup> Madam de Stieger, "Art and the Supernatural" a paper read to the British National Association of Spiritualists, 4 April, printed in *Light*, 23 April, 1881, pp.122-3.

making of this significant artist. Yet her creative output was prolific, indeed her numerous early writings and poems anticipate the themes of life, death and resurrection which later dominate her paintings.

The Pickering family background was also to provide advantageous links for a young woman artist. The influence of De Morgan's uncle, John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, enabled an early introduction to first generation Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Rossetti and Holman Hunt, as well as to Spencer Stanhope's mentor, G.F. Watts; and shared aims and interests are evident in several works by these artists.

As well as the supportive relationship between De Morgan and Spencer Stanhope, the new opportunities for women to receive proper art training at the Slade School of Art enabled women, for the first time, to compete at the same professional level as their male counterparts. Despite this, De Morgan and other women still faced entrenched prejudice of male artists and critics towards professional women artists, and De Morgan, along with other women artists of the period, such as Emily Ford, became involved in women's rights campaigning, which in itself had affinities with spiritualist debates. These interests are incorporated into her works, with the emphasis of the female as a chief protagonist in many of her allegorical works.

In the 1880s, De Morgan travelled alone to Italy, worked in her own studio and regularly submitted works to important exhibitions at the Grosvenor and New Galleries. By the time she met William De Morgan in 1883, they shared common interests in the moral value of art, spiritualism and philosophical debate. Their joint interest in spiritualism, and venture into mediumship through the practice of automatic writing, advocated by William's mother Sophia De Morgan, and Stainton Moses, resulted in the (anonymous) publication of spirit transcripts in *The Result of an Experiment*, which confirmed their committed belief in spiritualism, and demonstrates their participation in the popular spiritualist debates of the late nineteenth-century.

These spiritualist groups focussed on scientific research as a legitimate form of enquiry into the metaphysical. Moreover, significant writers such as Wallace occupied a respected position as both spiritualist and evolutionary scientist. Groups such as the LSA, in their journal *Light*, invoked scientific rationalism, in the form of Darwin's evolutionary model as proof of the soul's development, and evolutionary metaphors

which persist throughout *The Result of an Experiment* are translated directly into De Morgan's paintings, with their emphasis on metamorphosis and transformation.

The influence of science and spiritualism in De Morgan's works are underpinned by the use of innovative and original artistic strategies. Through close analysis of several of De Morgan's key works, I have shown that De Morgan draws upon Platonist philosophy, to produce striking reworking of allegories, discussed in Chapter Three. Along with writers such as Pater and Paget, De Morgan uses art to explore broad philosophical notions, and Platonic models of access to absolute truth and fixed reality. These are realised in her works through the emphasis on metaphysical concepts and spiritual enlightenment. De Morgan's use of iconography, colour and unusual representation of traditional subject matter produce highly complex symbolism in her works. De Morgan gives equal credence to representations of witches, as well as saints and martyrs, discussed in chapters three and four, and I have demonstrated how De Morgan uses such archetypes in an attempt to challenge the perceived divisions of good/malevolent powers associated with female mysticism. These themes are directly related to nineteenth-century spiritualist debate, and articles aligning fifteenth-century witches with nineteenth-century mediums were published in *Light* throughout the last three decades of the century. These articles may have directly influenced De Morgan's representations of martyrs and occult figures, as both the images she paints and contemporary published commentaries repeatedly conflate the roles of the witch, saint and medium.

I have shown how De Morgan creates an alternative to Christian patriarchy through her spiritualist beliefs, in which the female is seen as a positive and empowered messianic figure. The mid-nineteenth century response to evolutionary theories in general, and to Darwin's accessible account in particular, generated innovative responses in De Morgan's art. The spiritualist aesthetic developed by De Morgan from the 1870s and into the first decades of the twentieth century was further consolidated by the impact of the First World War. Her themes and subjects chart both a response to the prevailing concerns of contemporary culture, and seek to resolve the tensions created by rationalist doubt through acceptable, alternative, soteriological doctrines.

In the final chapter, I have argued that De Morgan uses water as a broad

evolutionary metaphor. This is compounded by De Morgan's approach to imagery and subjects associated with water, including mermaids, shells and fossils. Indeed, I have shown that De Morgan exploits marine symbolism to emphasise and explore the spiritualist appropriation of evolutionary progression. The focus on water and marine images serves to integrate De Morgan's pivotal concern to assimilate science and spiritualism through the medium of maternal, regenerative symbolism associated with water.

De Morgan's contribution to the art and intellectual concerns of the period are established through the sophisticated and subtle new presentations of conventional subject matter, expressed through allegory, symbolism and metaphor by means of an exploration of the female form. De Morgan's personal interpretations of traditional subject matter are expressed through allegory and symbolism. These are underpinned by De Morgan's distinctive iconographical emphasis on colour, and, combined with the significance of evolutionary progression, De Morgan's art represents a mediation between her engagement with spiritualism, underpinned by the rationality proposed by empirical science, and her belief, as a professional artist, in the power of the image to transform society. It is, therefore, essentially proactive, creating new connotations, rather than re-presenting existing ideas.

The dialogue between science and religion was debated throughout the nineteenth century by artists such as De Morgan, Emily Ford, Rossetti, Morris; intellectuals such as J.S. Mill, Thomas Carlyle; and by scientists, ranging from Darwin to Conan-Doyle. It was to have far-reaching consequences, shaping much of twentieth-century thought as a direct result. For spiritualists such as De Morgan, the expansion of science and empirical research could be seen as a way of adding a new authority to the conviction in the soul's existence. A.R. Wallace, summarises the integral relationship between the two drives:

It will be seen that Spiritualism is no mere "psychological" curiosity, no indication of some hitherto unknown "law of nature;" but that it is a science of vast extent, having the widest, the most important, and the most practical issues, and as such should enlist the sympathies alike of moralists, philosophers and politicians, and of all who have at heart the

improvement of society and the permanent elevation of human nature.<sup>2</sup>

Wallace's view that science, spiritualism, and socialism formed a compatible and organic framework that offered new potential for a progressive society, were shared by many different groups, but particularly welcomed by spiritualists. In the paintings, and also in the anonymously published automatic writings, De Morgan's expression of a spiritualist aesthetic echoes the dominant concerns of late Victorian experience. This includes the exploitation of evolutionary scheme of incremental progression, moral responsibility, and an examination of the materialist interests created capitalist mass-production. The vehicle for this exercise is predominantly a dynamic recasting of the female body, expressed through either existing models (literary tales, legend, mythology and biblical narrative for example) or through a more enigmatic envisioning of spiritual emancipation, in allegorical or Symbolist works such as *The Captives* (c.1910/14) and *S.O.S.* (c. 1914).

For women, spiritualism offered more than an alternative to the providential design postulated by orthodox instruction. Spiritualism enabled women to take up public and political positions "assum[ing] a voice denied them by orthodox religion at a time when the church was struggling to shore up its traditional position of arbiter of social and moral values".<sup>3</sup> Important spiritualists, including Sophia De Morgan, and William Stainton Moses, endorse the support of women mediums. The latter, paralleling De Morgan's emphasis on the equality inherent in the spiritualist vision of the soul argues, "it is a duty [...] to develop to its highest potential the faculties of every soul, whether it chances to be enshrined in a male or female body".<sup>4</sup>

This research has drawn upon unpublished primary and archival sources, in order to illustrate the previously unknown correspondence between De Morgans and the LSA. The journal *Light*, is of central importance to an analysis of De Morgan's works and

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<sup>2</sup>A.R. Wallace, *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism, Three Essays*, London, 1881, p.222.

<sup>3</sup> A. Owen, *The Darkened Room, Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, p.39.

<sup>4</sup> [M.A. Oxon] W. Stainton Moses, "Notes by the way" in *Light*, 14 November, 1891,

nineteenth-century spiritualism, as it presents both a forum of ideas and important links between De Morgan and other spiritualists, including artists with similar interests in women's suffrage and socialism such as Ford. *Light* serves as a valuable source of contemporary responses to those themes, which are central in De Morgan's work, from religious figures, to witches, and from the natural sciences to their relation to the metaphysical, as well as providing a public platform for female speakers and writers such as Sophia De Morgan, to publish their views. Most significantly, the articles and themes which dominate *Light* demonstrate that the occult was an important and legitimate area for serious enquiry and debate as part of mainstream culture. Rather than spiritualism operating on the periphery of Victorian theological and scientific debate, *Light* shows that spiritualism was at the centre of art and science in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In the new light of De Morgan's close connection with the LSA, and other groups such as the Society for Psychical Research, a re-appraisal of her works in the period 1870-1919, supports my assertion that De Morgan's works in this time are motivated primarily by her spiritualist beliefs. These beliefs are expressed scientific terms of reference, as I have maintained, with the recurring theme of evolutionary progression. However, the scientific framework pervades all her works, where it can be seen in language, such as in the title of her spirit-correspondence book, *The Result of an Experiment*; in contemporary interests, such as the minute observation of shells, fossils, and geological structures, and in the search and classification of new and fantastic species, such as the mermaid. With De Morgan's prolonged 'experiment' from the late 1870s onwards, in trance automatic writings, the search for the physical manifestation, or scientific 'proof' of an afterlife, becomes consolidated in her paintings.

De Morgan's works are not simply reconfigured feminist tropes, or an alternative teleology; rather they form a powerful collective statement of her deeply held beliefs in the transformative power of art to engage with contemporary culture. Fundamental concerns of nineteenth-century culture are expressed in the encounter between science and spiritualism, and De Morgan's works reconcile concepts of evolution, female empowerment, and the soul's progression, through the medium of art.

However, I propose that De Morgan's works are not mere reflections of

contemporary themes; rather, they demonstrate a particular and exclusive, contribution to late nineteenth-century culture, and have a resonance which continues into the twenty-first century. They can also now be located into a specific feminist tradition of art, ranging from the works of Artemisia Gentileschi in seventeenth-century Italy, and continuing after De Morgan in the twentieth century. I propose that De Morgan's works can be situated in a genealogy of female art, which continues through the works of artists such as Sarah Lucas and Jenny Saville, seen for example in *Au Naturel* (1994), and *Hybrid* (1997), respectively. These artists have, like De Morgan, sought to redefine artistic expression through representations of the female form in art. Other artists, too, are currently concerned with creating art through and about science, such as Orlan, in body-art works/performances (for example *Omnipresence*, 21 November 1993) using science and new, challenging technology to explore the relationship between the physical and metaphysical world through the female body.

The profound impact of science and spiritualism, embedded in De Morgan's works, is therefore, not just important within the context of nineteenth-century cultural transformations, but continues to form an important impetus in contemporary art and debate. The impact of spiritualism, underpinned by empirical science, and the developing soul, expresses De Morgan's personal insight into a fundamental nineteenth-century movement of ideas. In so doing, De Morgan's work has resonance for contemporary and subsequent perceptions of her art, as it provides a paradigm of ways in which ideas about science and spiritualism were being developed and conflated in the late nineteenth-century.



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The De Morgan Foundation archives are currently located at the Witt Library, Courtauld Institute, London. The material consists of a large miscellaneous collection of papers, correspondence, manuscripts, journals and legal documents. These are unclassified and are currently in the process of being catalogued. For the purpose of this thesis, the material is arranged alphabetically.

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Assorted family papers, journals and documents, including the journals of Anna Maria Wilhelmina Pickering (Evelyn De Morgan's mother), poetry books and journals of John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (1837-?), family letters.

Extensive collection of assorted letters, reviews, and scrapbooks relating to Stirling's books and the disposal of Evelyn De Morgan's paintings.

Large collection of unpublished photographs, including Evelyn, William, May Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Margaret Burne-Jones, Jane Hales.

Legal documents including De Morgan and Pickering family wills, probate, solicitor's letters (dealing with the disposal of De Morgan's paintings).

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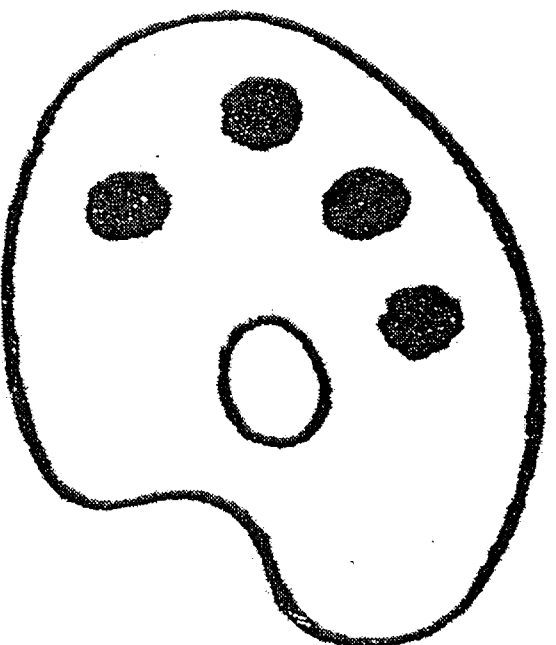
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# Numerous Originals in Colour





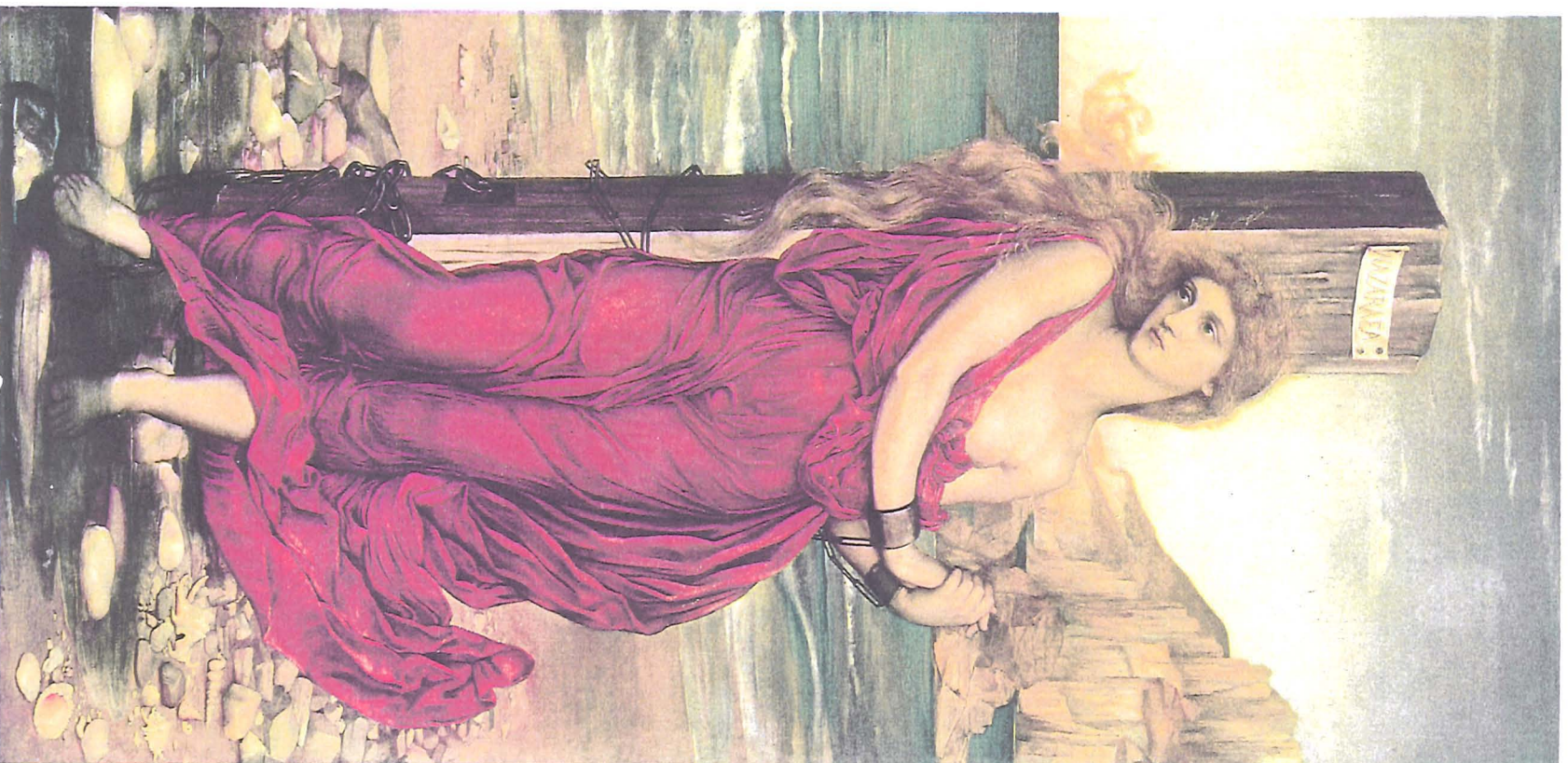
1. E. De Morgan, *The Captives*, n.d. (23¾ x 33)





2. E. De Morgan, *The Passing of the Soul at Death*, n.d. (22½ x 32¼)





3. E. De Morgan, *The Christian Martyr*, 1882 (83¼ x 40¼)



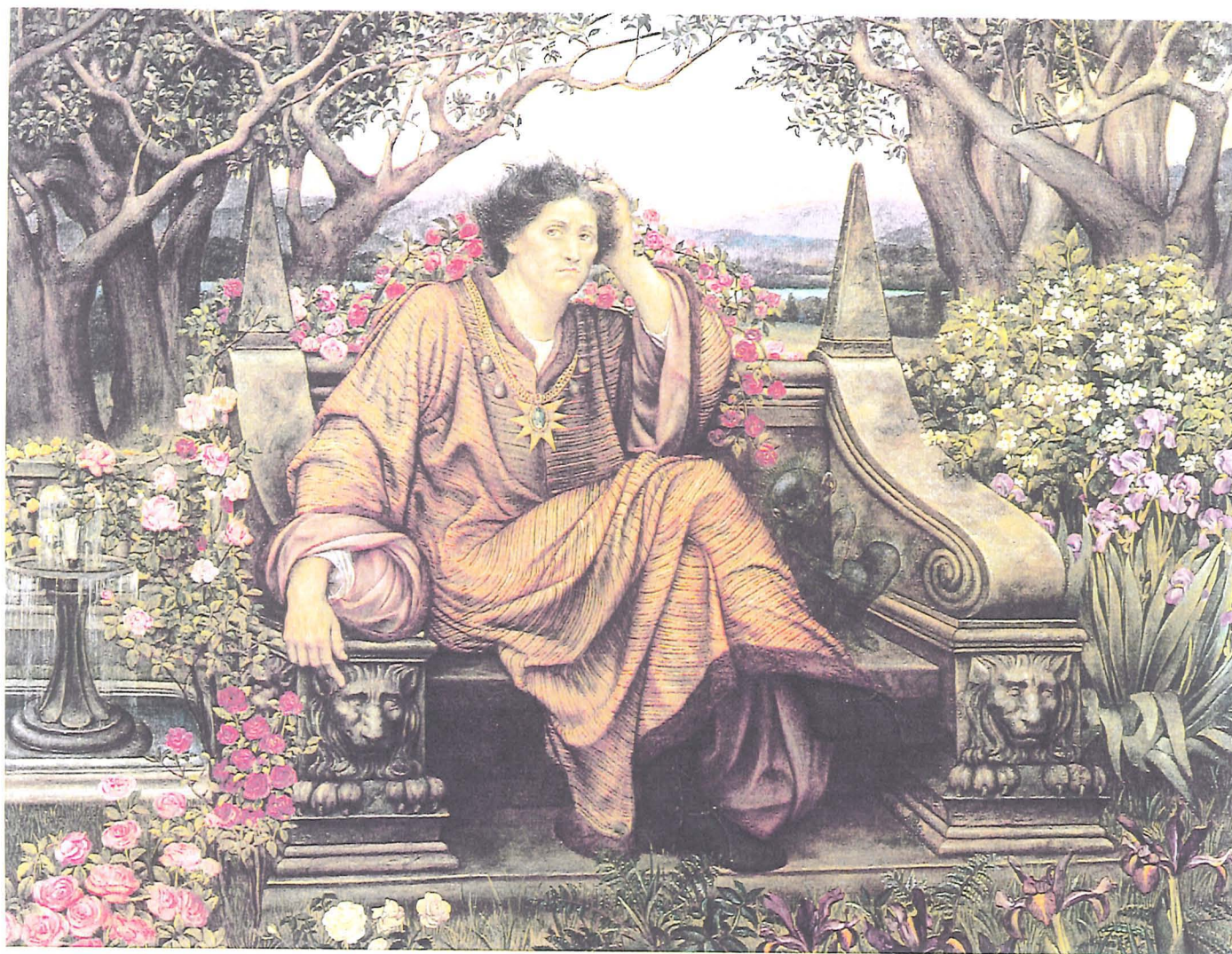


4. E. De Morgan, *The Angel of Death* (I), 1880 (48 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ )









6. E. De Morgan, *A Soul in Hell*, n.d. (25½ x 33)





7. E. De Morgan, *The Worship of Mammón*, 1909 (23¾ x 19¾)





8. E. De Morgan, *The Storm Spirits*, 1900 (46¼ x 68)





9. E. De Morgan, *The Hourglass*, 1904-5 (36½ x 31)

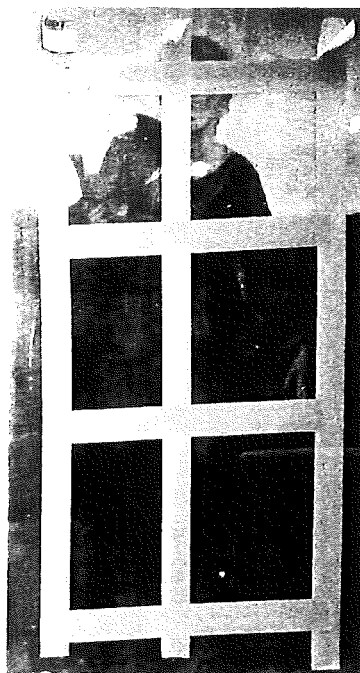




10. W. Dyce, *Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1858*, 1858-

60 (24½ x 34½) Tate Gallery, London

**Please note:** Illustration number **27** appears below illustration  
number **11**



11. E. De Morgan, *St. Catherine of Alexandria*, 1876 ( $41\frac{1}{2} \times 24\frac{3}{4}$ )



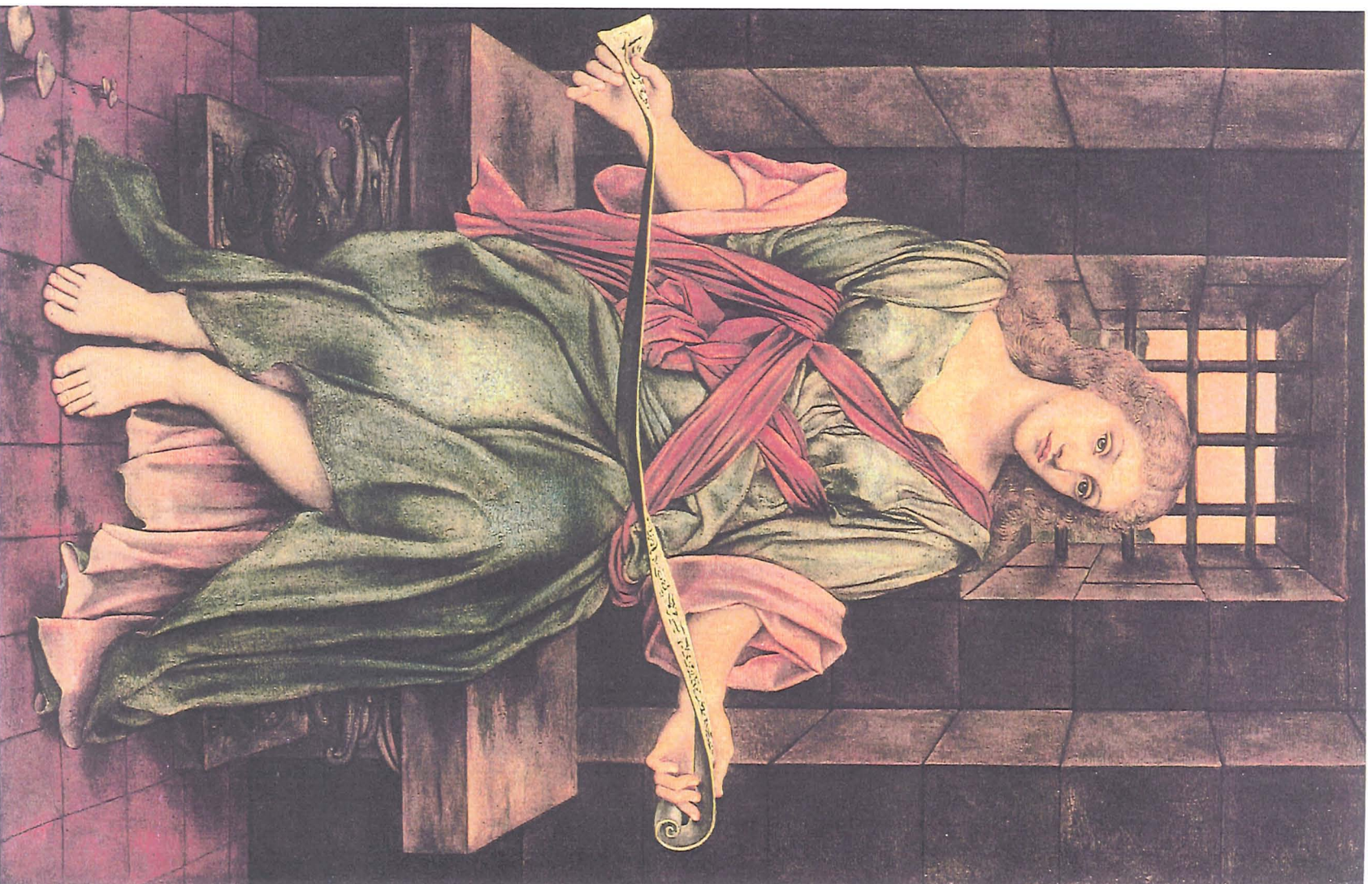
27. *Realities*, 1910-14 ( $50\frac{3}{4} \times 68\frac{3}{4}$ ). Original destroyed by fire. Poor photographic reproduction.



12







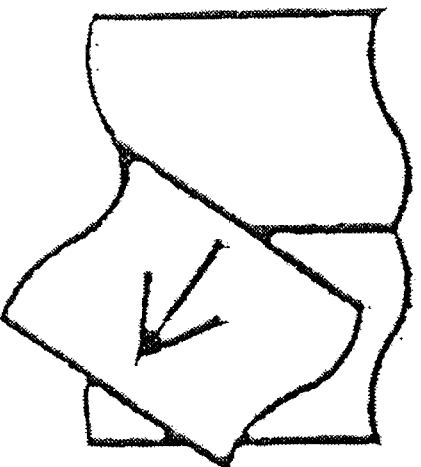
13. E. De Morgan, *The Soul's Prison House*, 1888 (31 x 20)

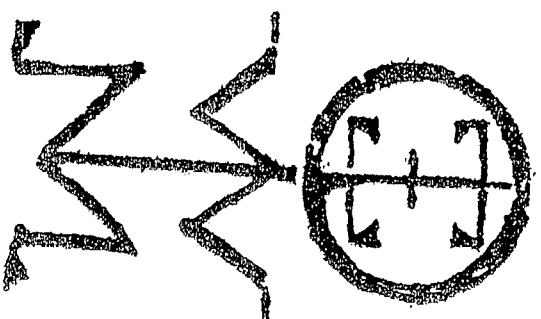
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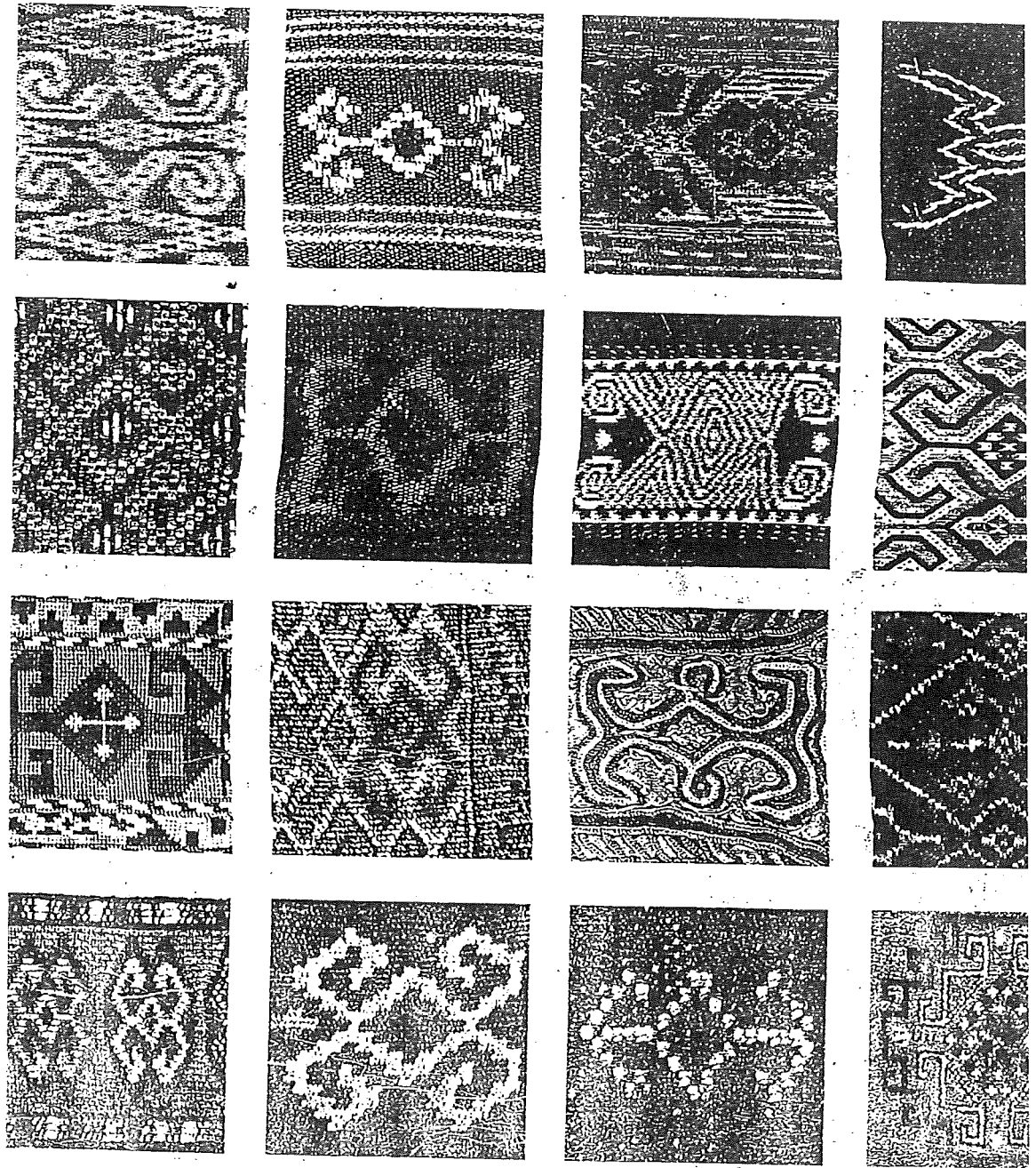
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14





15. W. De Morgan, *Composite Monogram*, reproduced in Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p.7 (2 x 1)



16. *Birth Symbol/Great Goddess*, 16 symbols from Eastern Europe and Asia, reproduced in *The Birth Symbol in Traditional Women's Art from Eurasia to the Western Pacific*, Toronto: Museum for Textiles, 1981, p.1.





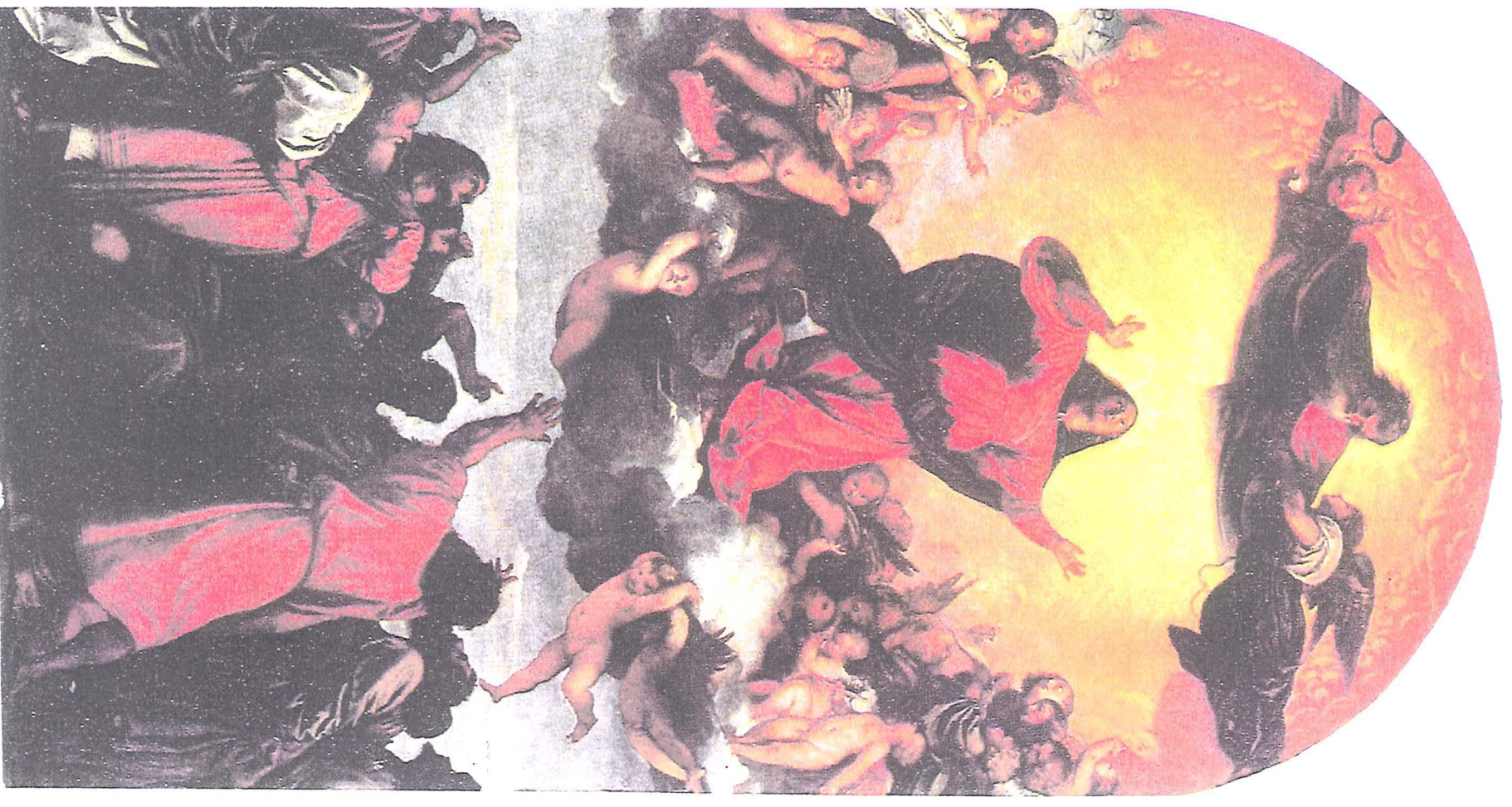
17. E. De Morgan, *The Valley of Shadows*, 1899 (49½ x 26)





18. E. De Morgan, *The Kingdom of Heaven Suffereth Violence, and the Violent take it by Force*, c.1907-19 (54¾ x 31¾)





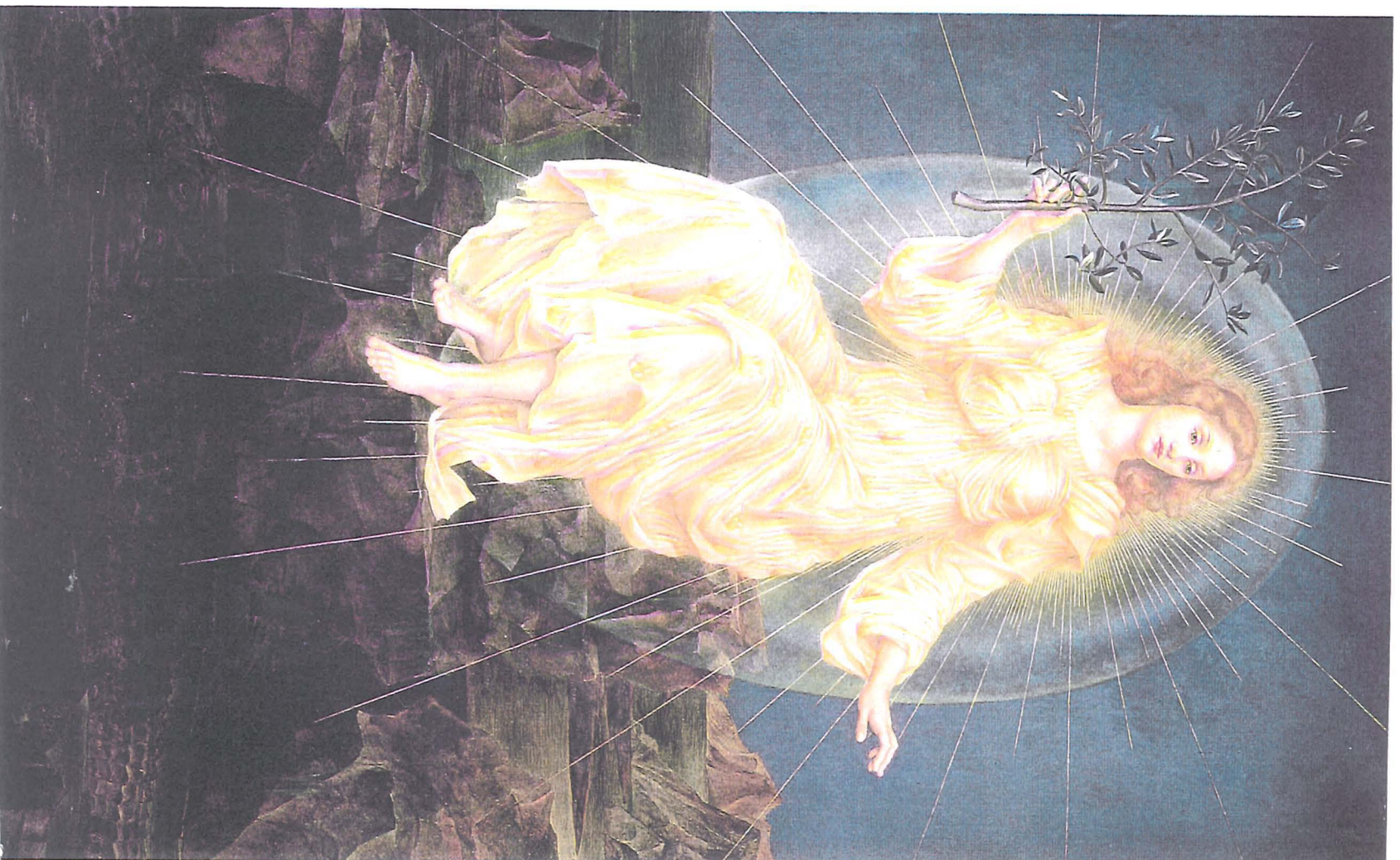
19. Titian, *The Assumption*, 1516-18 (23' x 11' 10"), Santa Maria de' Frari, Venice.





20. E. De Morgan, *Gloria in Excelsis*, 1893 (46 x 30½)





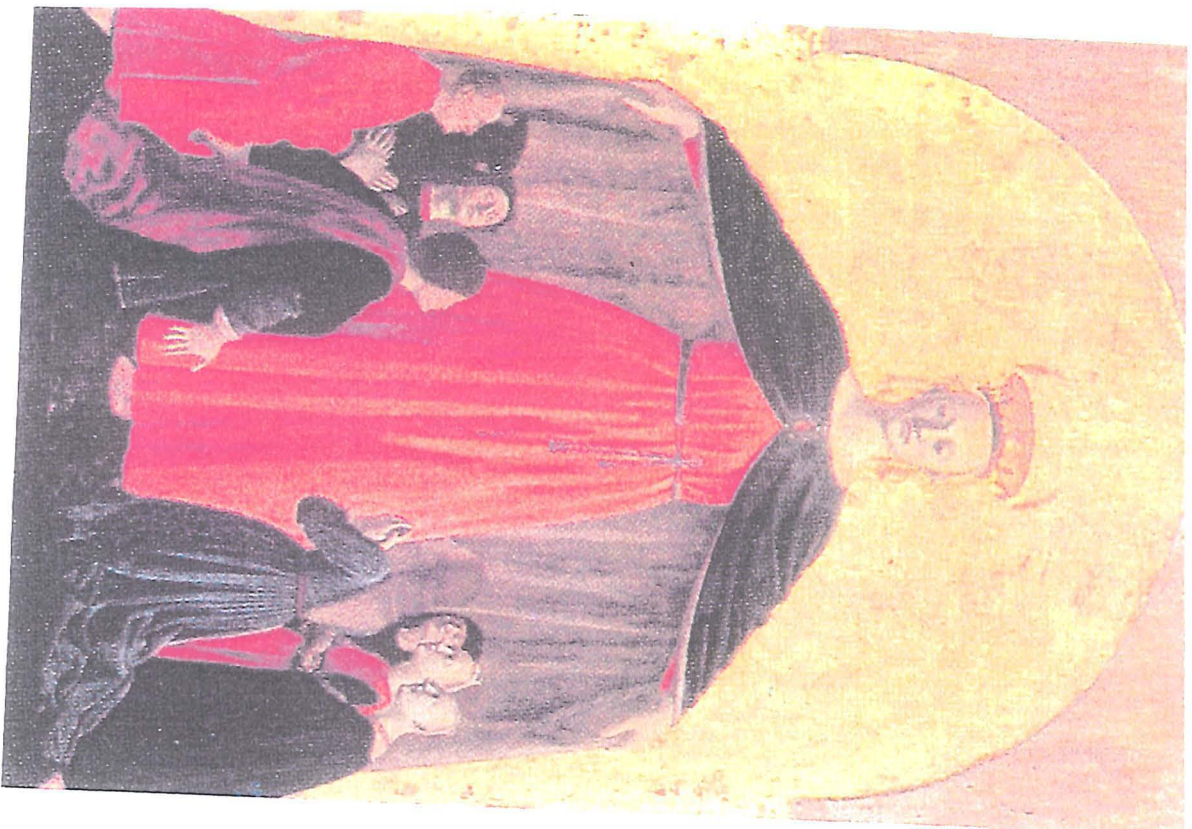
21. E. De Morgan, *Lux in Tenebris*, 1895 (49½ x 29½)



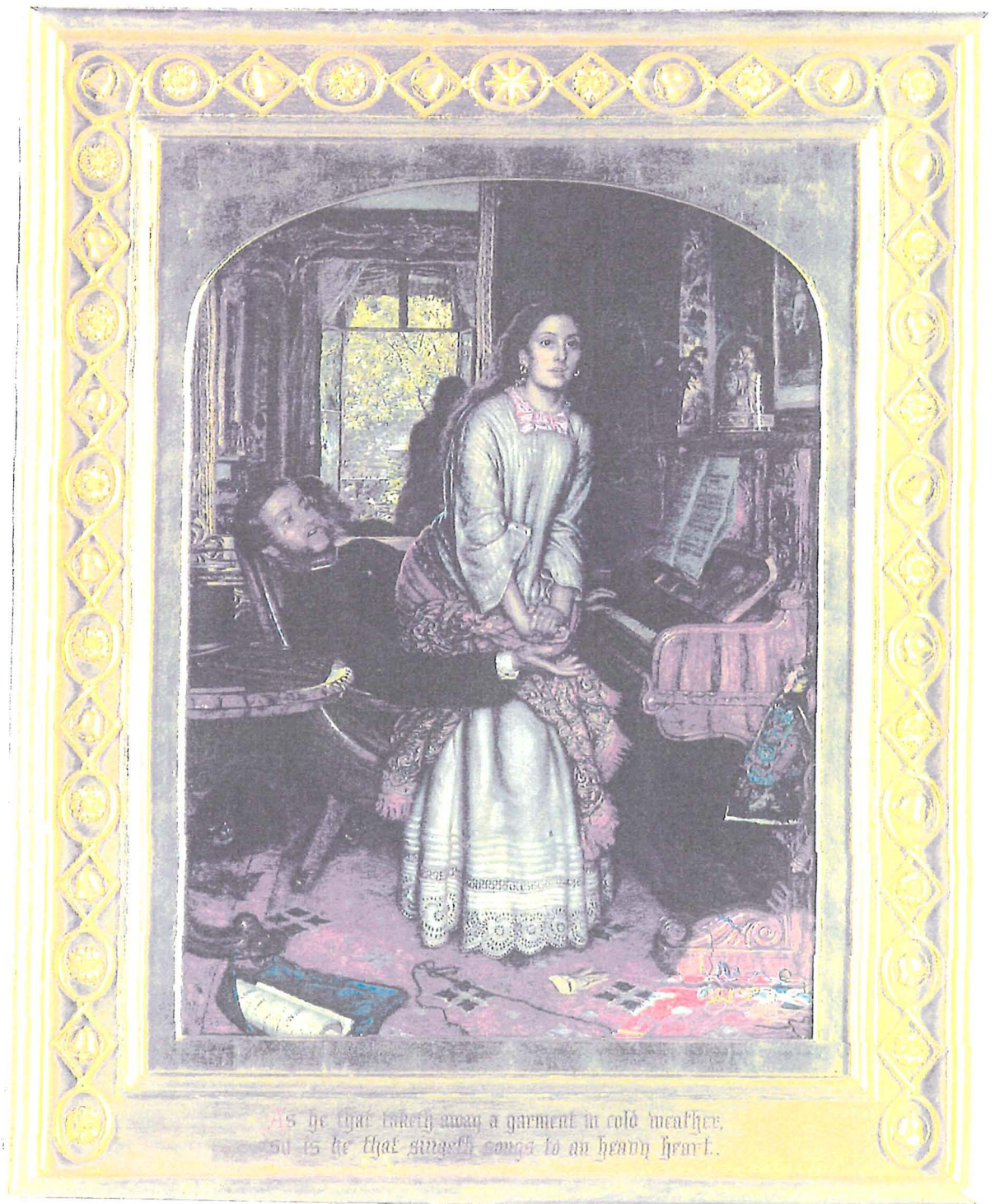


22. E. De Morgan, *The Light Shinneth in the Darkness, and the Darkness Comprehendeth it Not*, 1906 (23½ x 17¾)





23. P. della Francesca, *Madonna della Misericordia*, c. 1462 (8'1 1/4 x 10'8"), Borgo San Sepulcro.



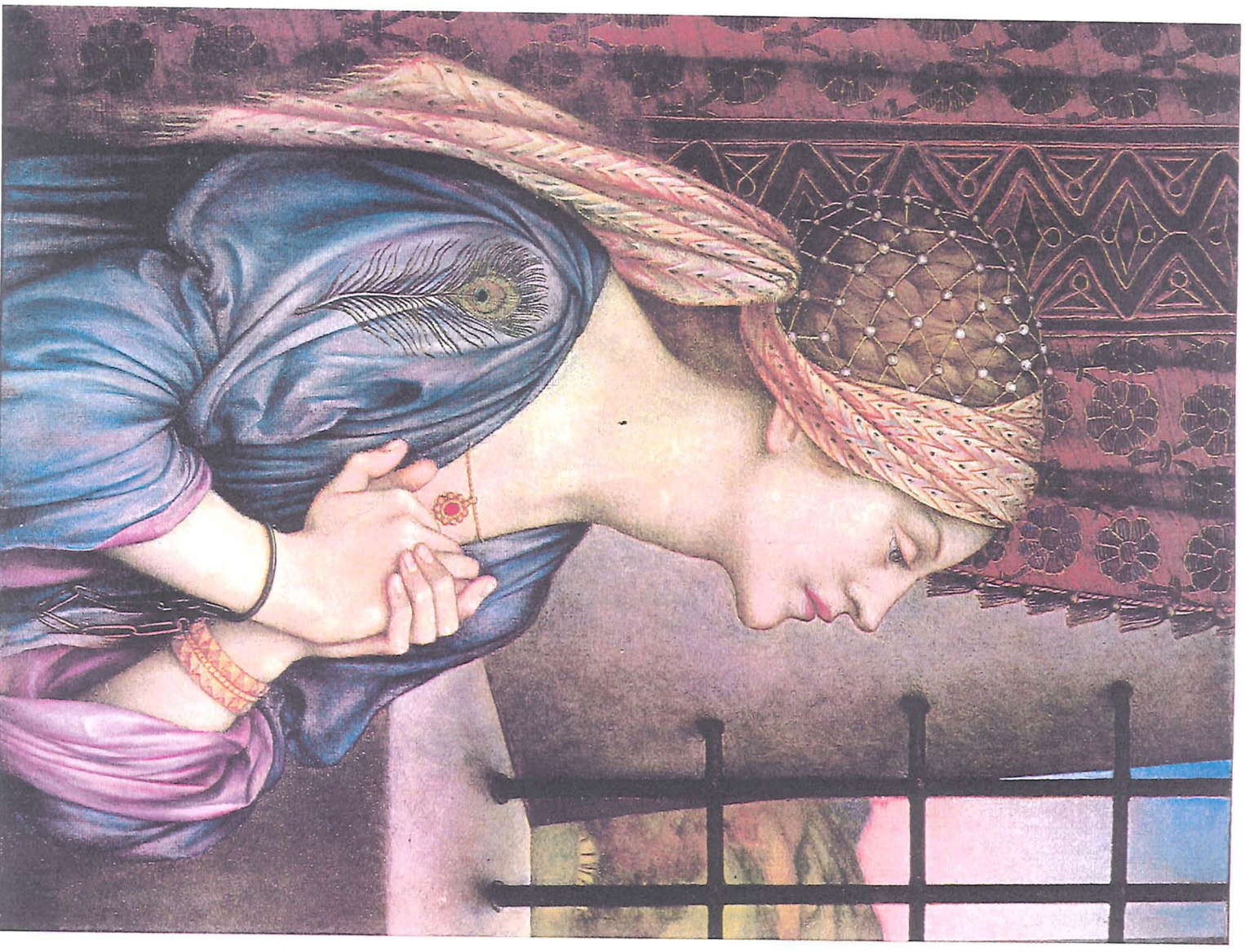
24. W. Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853 (28½ x 22), Tate Gallery, London





25. E. De Morgan, *The Gilded Cage*, n.é. (35¼ x 42)





26. E. De Morgan, *The Prisoner*, 1907-8 (24 x 17¼)

**Please note: Illustration number 27 appears below illustration  
number 11**





28. J.E. Millais, *The Martyr of the Solway*, 1871 (27 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ ), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool





29. E. De Morgan, *The Love Potion*, 1903 (41 x 20½)





30. E. De Morgan, *Medea*, 1899 (59 x 35)





31. F. Sandys, *Medea*, 1868 (24¼ x 18¼), Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.



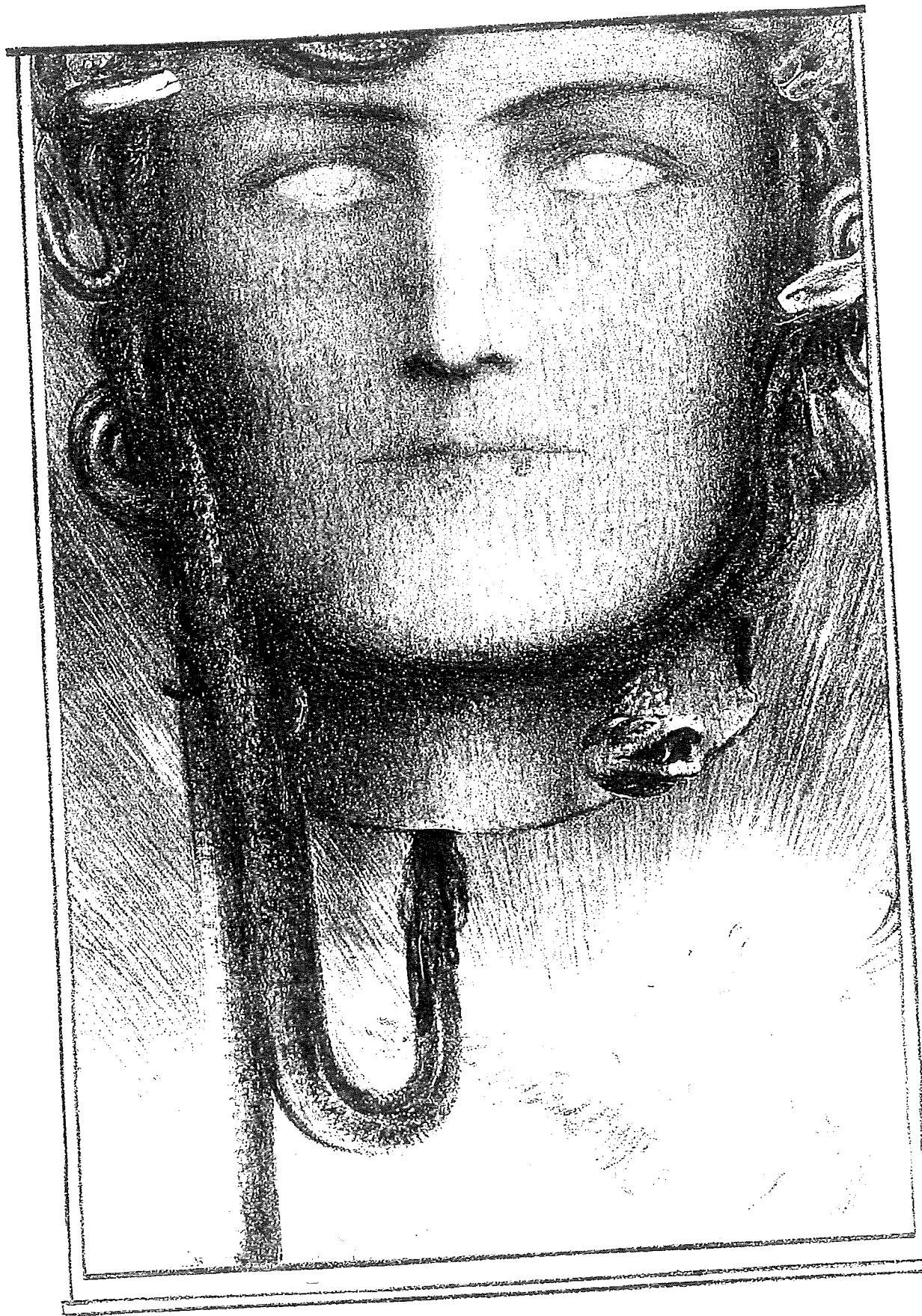


32. J. W. Waterhouse, *Study for Jason and Medea*, c.1907 (36 x 24), J. Nicholson, Beverley Hills, CA



33. F. Sandys, *Medusa*, 1875 (28¾ x 21½), chalk, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.





34. F. Khnopff, *The Blood of the Medusa*, c.1895 (8¾ x 5¾ ), charcoal,  
Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels.



35. S. Solomon, *The Tormented Soul*, 1894 (15 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ ), black and white chalk on paper, Piccadilly Gallery, London.





36. E. De Morgan, *Medusa*, c. 1875. Bronze bust, private collection.  
Photograph reproduced in Stirling, *William De Morgan*, p. 186.



37. E. De Morgan, *Queen Eleanor and the Fair Rosamund*, c. 1902 (29 x 25½)





38. E. De Morgan, *S.O.S.*, c.1914 (30 x 19)





39. E. De Morgan, *Luna*, 1885 (28  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 23)



40. E. De Morgan, *Sleeping Earth and Wakening Moon*, c. 1905 (17¼ x 13½)

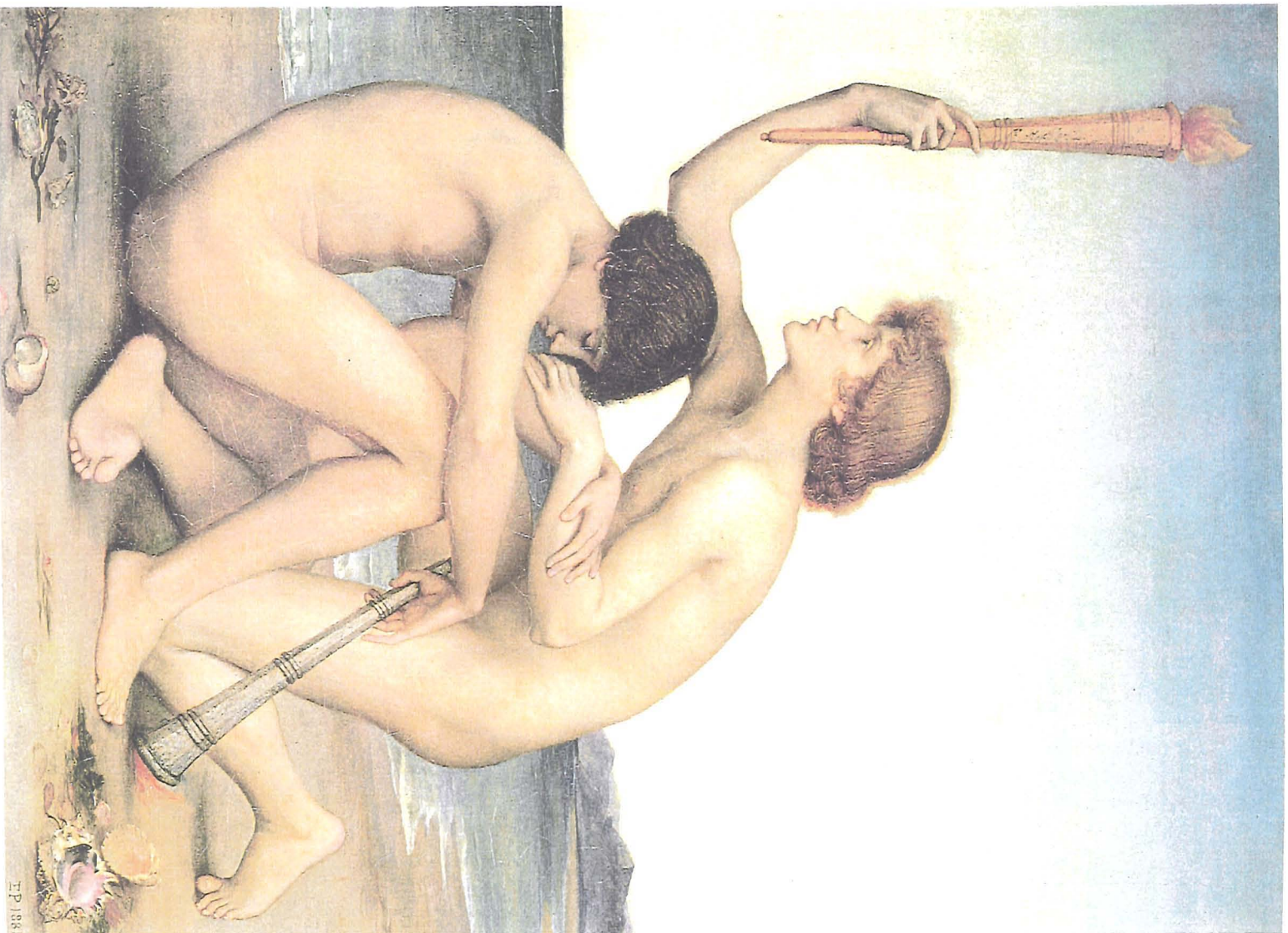


41. E. De Morgan, *Moonbeams Dipping into the Sea*, c. 1900 (31 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ )



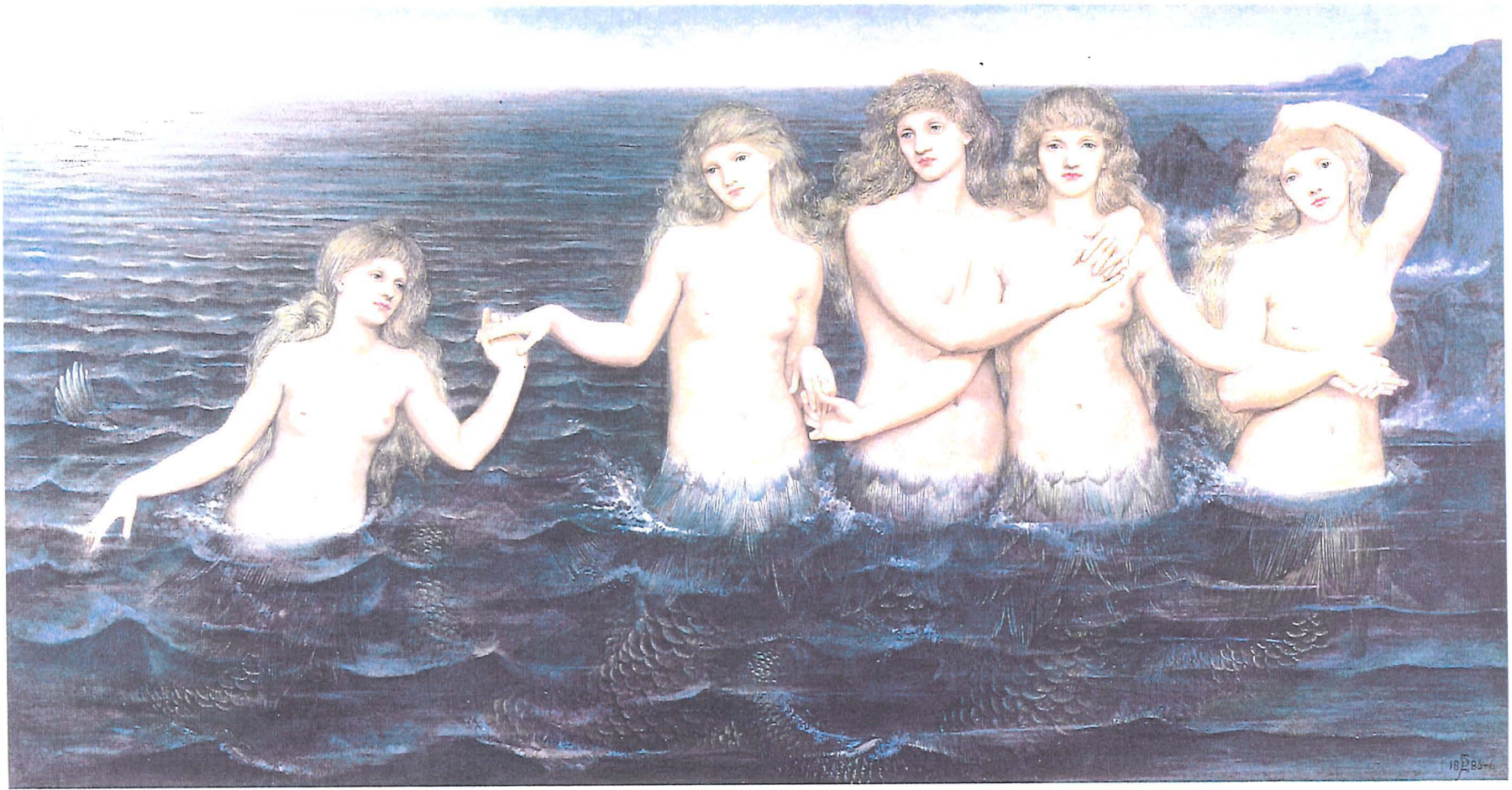


42. E. De Morgan, *Venus and Cupid*, 1878 (49 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ )



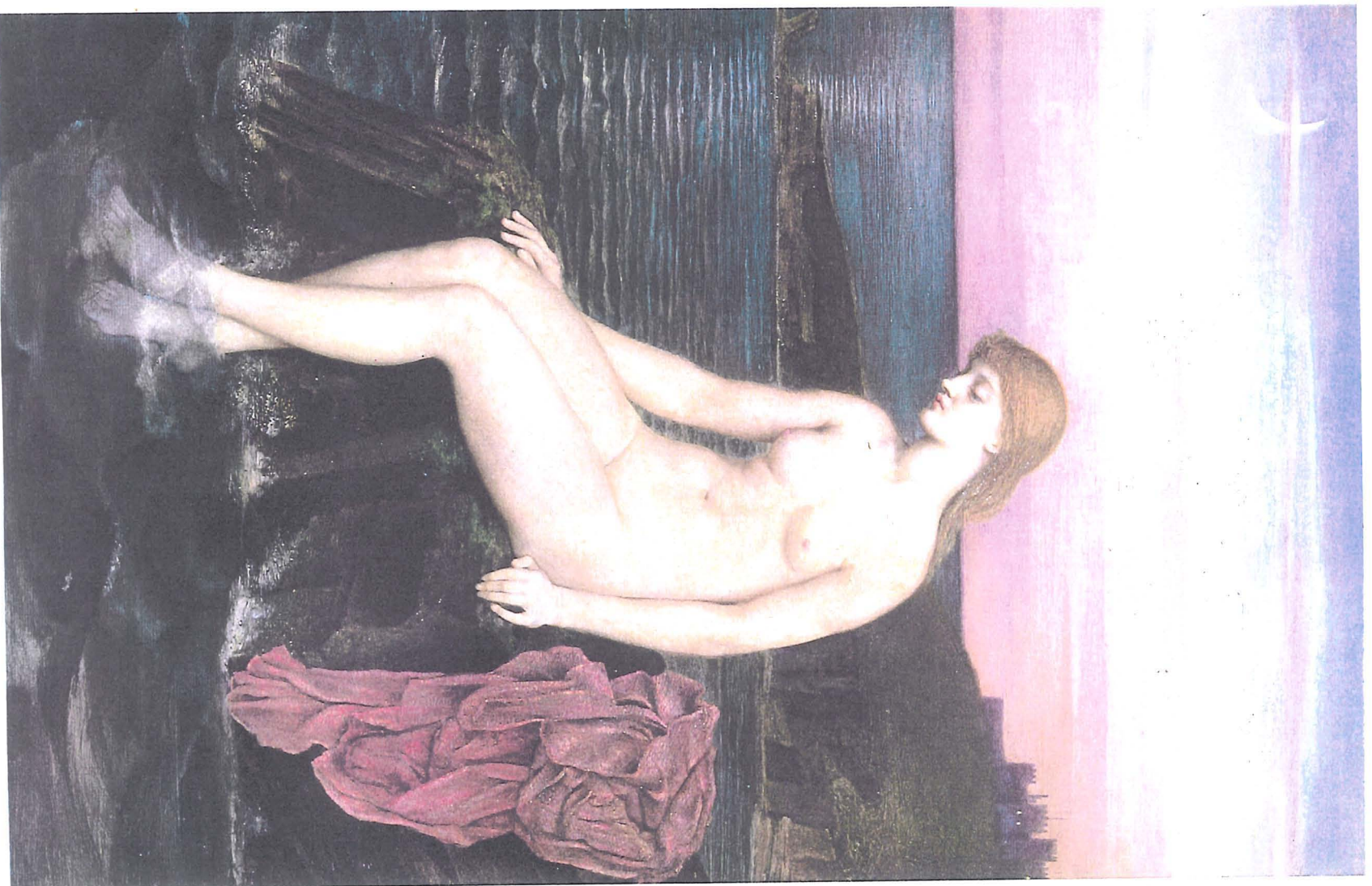
43. E. De Morgan, *Phosphorus and Hesperus*, 1881 (23¼ x 17¼)





44. E. De Morgan, *The Sea Maidens*, 1885-6 (25 x 49)





45. E. De Morgan, *The Little Sea Maid*, 1886-8 (39½ x 19)



46. E. De Morgan, *Daughters of the Mist*, n.d. (38½ x 31½)